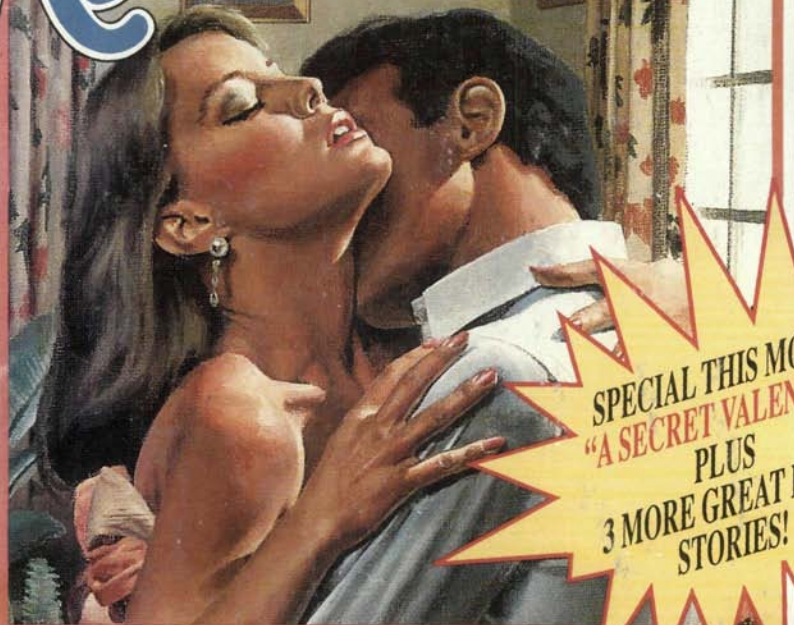


HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Vol. 3 No. 4
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Romances



SPECIAL THIS MONTH
"A SECRET VALENTINE"
PLUS
3 MORE GREAT LOVE
STORIES!

A Secret Valentine
Gilding the Lily
A Taste of Deception
Return to Yesterday

DIXIE BROWNING
EMILIE RICHARDS
EVE GLADSTONE
ANNETTE BROADRICK

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DIXIE BROWNING

Award-winning, bestselling author Dixie Browning has written fifty romance books since 1980. A charter member of Romance Writers of America, Dixie has toured extensively in order to research her romance novels. She also writes historical romance with her sister under the name Bronwyn Williams.

EMILIE RICHARDS

Emilie Richards began writing fiction in 1983 and has been able to incorporate into her stories many of her experiences working as a family counselor. Since her first romances were published in 1985, Emilie has gone on to write twenty-seven romance novels. She enjoys writing about complex characters who make significant changes in their lives. And she heartily approves of happy endings.



EVE GLADSTONE

Eve Gladstone lives in a New York suburb and has published a number of books, both fiction and nonfiction, for children, teens and adults. Apart from painting and writing, she's a voracious reader of romance novels.

ANNETTE BROADRICK

Annette Broadrick lives on the shores of the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri doing what she loves most—reading and writing romance fiction. Since 1984 when her first book was published, Annette has been delighting her readers with her imaginative and innovative style. Among the numerous awards she has received is the *Romantic Times'* Lifetime Achievement Award for Series Romance.



HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST
Romances

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

It's almost time to decide...will it be flowers or chocolate? Maybe this year I'll go all out and give both plus a romantic candlelight dinner--just for two!

But right now I can't wait to be entranced as...a reputed ladies' man shakes up a well-ordered woman... a past mistake turns into a passion of a lifetime...one kiss erupts into a crescendo of emotions...and a frantic search brings two hearts more than they bargained for!

Join me on a journey through this month's volume of the World's Best Romances, and make your Valentine's Day one to remember!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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Harlequin World's Best Romances (ISSN 1183-5044) Vol. 3 No. 4 January/February 1994. Published six times per year every other month by Harlequin Periodicals Inc., 112 Tenth Street, Des Moines, IA 50309. Second Class postage paid at Des Moines, IA, and additional mailing offices.

Subscription rates U.S. only: 6 issues—\$10.96. Single-issue rate—\$2.75. Subscriptions not available outside the U.S.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Harlequin Periodicals Inc., P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233. For subscription orders, changes of address, correspondence concerning subscription, write Harlequin World's Best Romances, c/o Harlequin Periodicals Inc., P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233. Please enclose latest address label for quickest service when writing about subscription.

**HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST**

Romances

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DIXIE BROWNING

A Secret Valentine



Now that Grace Spencer's life was finally perfect, she didn't need construction worker Quinn Donovan breaking down barriers and building up new expectations in her heart!



The trucks—cobalt blue and clearly marked with the QD emblem of the engineering firm, were already in the school yard, and Grace's lips tightened as she saw Terri flirting with the construction workers. She wondered, not for the first time, if it had been a mistake to go for a teaching position instead of an office job. In an office she wouldn't have been called on to deal with discipline problems.

Grace took a deep breath and adjusted the imaginary ramrod along her spine as she opened the door to her classroom and let the students in. "Good morning, girls."

"Good morning, Miss Spencer," came the obedient response—so why did it always sound like "Miss Spinster" to her ears?

Grace closed her mind to the competing attraction just outside the window and began her lesson on the intricacies of word processing.

"Carly, watch for the prompt," Grace said with frayed patience. "It will tell you what you've done wrong, and all you have to do is look in your manual and find out how to correct it."

"Why do I have to learn all this junk when I'm planning on being an engineer?"

Grace reminded the red-faced eighteen-year-old, "Last month you were planning to be a paralegal."

"That was *before*," Carly replied, and Grace didn't have to ask,

before what? Before that uncouth giant came two weeks ago to litter the landscape with his monstrous machines and his tightly jeaned, bearded, hard-hatted crew!

At three-fifteen she saw her last class file out and snatched up her briefcase. It was Friday, thank the Lord, and for two whole days and three glorious nights she intended to forget she had ever heard of any piece of office equipment more sophisticated than a pencil!

Well...not so glorious, at that. She had promised Elliot she would go to dinner and a movie with him. She couldn't drum up much excitement. More's the pity, she admitted to herself as she swung along toward the charming, if somewhat shabby, house where she lived with an assortment of inherited cats and houseplants.

She checked the mailbox automatically, not allowing herself to admit disappointment when there was no letter from All Seasons Greetings.

Stripping out the pins that held her hair in a tightly confined knot, she padded out to the kitchen.

The kitchen was impossible, the bathroom even more so. Great Uncle Henry had known better than to complain to the rental agent. He had patiently bailed out the back part of the house every time it rained rather than risk having his rent raised.

After finishing some sharp cheese and polishing off an apple, she braided her long brown hair into one thick plait.

The house had belonged to her great-aunt and -uncle, or at least they had rented it for so long that they considered it theirs. Grace had first seen it when she had been delegated to attend the funeral of her great-aunt Aldonia. Grace had readily accepted the mission, looking on it as a vacation of sorts. She had been working hard for too long, as well as going to night school for the past three years, and her relationship with her family still held a certain amount of tension.

Grace's rebellion had been the cause of the rift. Her father, Colonel Bergen Spencer, USMC retired, had more or less drummed her out of the family. Jilly, her younger sister, had rallied around during the financial nightmare, but Jill, bless her, could offer little but love and uncritical support.

Living in the same small New England town, although in her own cheap apartment, Grace had gradually reinstated herself with her family until she was once more able to join them for the occasional Sunday dinner and family birthday parties.

By the time the telegram from Brunswick, Georgia, had come, she was near exhaustion from years of work and night school, but she had found herself immediately warming to Uncle Henry. Grace had put off going home again and again. She felt more relaxed in the shabby old house with Uncle Henry than she had in years—than she *ever* had at home.

They had fallen into a pleasant rut that had lasted until Henry had died, eleven months after his wife. Grace applied for a teaching position at a local junior college. Now, after her first two months of teaching, she felt reasonably certain that she had settled.

Her daily bread was assured—and the butter would be provided by All Seasons Greeting Cards, Inc., as it had been for the past six years.

If anything good could be said to have come from her disastrous affair with Don, it was that. Someone had mentioned that she ought to try sending her ideas to a greeting card company after seeing the cleverly illustrated rhyming notices she had placed around The Apple Barrel. All Seasons had liked her things enough to use her as a continuing contributor on a free-lance basis. The pay wasn't great, but the satisfaction kept her soul intact through the bad times.

After grabbing a sweater, Grace let herself out and headed for one of her favorite places of inspiration. She tucked her portfolio and India ink pen under her arm as she followed the narrow, winding road to a small clearing she had come to think of as her sanctuary. The late November warmth had gone with the setting sun. New developments were encroaching on both sides, with paved streets and all the usual city-type facilities, but her own few acres had been left untouched, thank goodness.

She had not gone more than a hundred feet along the road when she heard the sound of an ap-

proaching vehicle. Grace stepped off into a clump of saw palmettos.

The tranquil atmosphere was shattered by the sight of a familiar cobalt-blue pickup. Suddenly all the daily frustrations of competing with QD's construction workers for her students' attention boiled up in her again. Grace hurled a stone to the ground. It bounced away, lost in the cloud of dust thrown up by the truck.

The engine noise ceased and the sound of a rock striking metal rang out like a shot in the hushed atmosphere.

Oh, blast! How was she to know the rock would ricochet? It was precisely the childish sort of behavior that had gotten her in trouble with her father years ago.

She stepped back onto the road and walked slowly toward the stationary pickup truck, cutting a wary glance toward the high, blue cab. There was no mistaking the arrogant angle of that head, the breadth of those shoulders. It was the one the girls called the Incredible Hunk. She heard the opening and slamming of the door.

"Girl!"

Girl? Grace refused to dignify the impertinent summons with recognition. She veered off onto an almost invisible animal track.

The large figure moved from the cab and crossed the few yards into the underbrush to confront her. Bracing herself, she lifted her chin. "I—I didn't mean to hit your truck."

The man was as big as a fortress. The eyebrows alone—thick, black as tar and arched over obsidian eyes,

would have set him apart, even without the mustache. That was thick, well trimmed and salted with gray.

When he spoke, his voice was a curiously gentle rumble, "My truck?"

Some of the painful rigidity drained from her backbone. "You mean I didn't hurt your truck? Then why did you come after me?"

Hooking big, well-shaped thumbs into his wide leather belt, he allowed his grin to fade. "To apologize for the dust bath, for one thing, and to warn you that you're near invisible at this time of day on a dusty road. I'd have slowed down if I'd seen you."

Grace mumbled something about not having expected any traffic and managed to tear her eyes away from the man's face. So this was what the girls were panting after!

He swung away then with a casual salute, and Grace watched him drive off with relief.

IT RAINED the first three days of the following week, precluding any outside work by the QD crew. To Grace's immense satisfaction several of her morning students applied themselves with surprising diligence, with only a few longing glances at the unpopulated construction site.

On Thursday the blue and orange trucks arrived just before eleven. A day and a half to go before the reprieve.

At times she had to remind herself of the reasons why she was now a levelheaded career woman rather than the dreamer she had once been.

She had started out as an art major—leaning toward the commercial end of the spectrum as a compromise to her father. The colonel did not look kindly on anything that smacked of frivolity.

And then, in her second year, she had met Don, a bearded potter who had dreams of setting up a small business that dealt in handmade musical instruments, natural foods and high-quality crafts, including his own distinctive pots, all in a coffee-house atmosphere.

Grace was ripe for a close relationship. When Jill was born, all yellow ringlets and big, sky-blue eyes, the colonel seemed to forget he even had another daughter. Grace no longer crept through the house, afraid her father would appear suddenly around a corner to demand that she recite the seventh line of multiplication tables or threaten her with shoulder braces if she didn't straighten up.

She had been content to drift through her high school years, day-dreaming, drawing and writing bad poetry. There had been occasional dates, but her father catechized her high school friends so severely before he allowed them to take her out that few of them returned for a second drilling. No sparks had been struck. None, that was, until Don Franklin had noticed her.

Don had easily persuaded her that he wanted nothing so much as to set them both up in a cozy little business. They could live together, love together, for the rest of their natural days.

She had all but dropped out of school, pouring all her energies into

their joint project. When she had told her family she was considering moving into Don's apartment in the back of the shabby old house they had rented for the store they had named The Apple Barrel, it had been the last straw. She had been told that she was no longer her father's daughter.

Don took to spending whole weekends away from the store and had stopped talking about a lovely homemade wedding in the spring, with fiddles and flutes. By the time the bills started pouring in, he had disappeared altogether, leaving her with only the consignment goods and a mountain of debts and legal entanglements.

In the subsequent years she had worked hard to pay back her debts and then to put herself through business school.

On Friday she was late getting away. Elliot would be coming at six. With luck she'd just make it. Elliot, who lived with his mother and a widowed sister in an eminently respectable part of town, liked to dine at six on the nose, and they usually made the seven o'clock movie feature. That way he was home before his womenfolk could begin to worry. For all his almost too perfect features and his manly pipe and tweeds, he didn't make her heart beat one whit faster, and that was precisely why she continued to date him.

The potatoes were underdone, and to make it worse Elliot rather ostentatiously ignored it, except for an oblique comment. "You shouldn't walk when you have a schedule to keep, Grace. Especially with a bag of groceries and a briefcase to carry."

Grace frowned as something tugged at the edges of her mind. "My briefcase!" She jumped up from the table and raced into the front room. Her briefcase was not on the plant-filled table where she always slung it when she came in. Nor was it on her bed or anywhere else.

"What's wrong?" Elliot glanced surreptitiously at his watch, reminding her that they were off schedule.

"I forgot my briefcase, darn it! And it's Friday."

"If it's important we could run by and pick it up," he offered grudgingly, and Grace shook herself out of her mood and smiled at him. Her briefcase carried almost a month's accumulation of new work, all ready to be transcribed and mailed off to Mr. Harris, and all her drawings, including a rather intricate design of palmetto whorls and one of flower faces she had been working on in her spare time.

"I can do without them until Monday." Elliot didn't know about her sideline. She had told no one of the foolishly romantic little verses and the whimsical drawings she had been selling for several years. "Let's put the dishes in to soak and I'll do them after I get home tonight."

ON MONDAY she raced to school to find her briefcase. It was not where she thought she had left it, but she located it on the table beside the copying machine and breathed a sigh of relief.

QD and company were out in full force today. She tried to ignore the swarming men and the whispering, distracted girls and plowed on with

her lecture on interfacing terminals. Boring. She caught herself in a sigh and her glance slipped sideways through the wall of glass.

Suddenly it seemed that everywhere she went, she was confronted by that immense, curly-headed creature with the outrageously fresh grin. Crossing the campus to the parking lot, she saw him standing beside one of the blue QD trucks. "Afternoon, Pigtails."

She killed a crazy impulse to reach up and assure herself that her neat chignon was still intact.

"You look like you've had a tough day." His soft Georgia drawl flowed over her like warm molasses. "Did you know your eyes are the exact color of lapis lazuli?"

Feeling oddly as if she were walking down an up escalator, she stared at him for several long moments before she remembered to scowl.

He reached out one hand and touched her neat, businesslike chignon. "If you used a wrench, you could probably tighten up another half turn on this thing." Before she could react, he sauntered off, a casual "See you" tossed over his massive shoulder.

She stood there blinking after him. He was too big, too tough, too uncouth, too—too *everything*! She closed her mind quickly to the small voice that whispered he was also too attractive. Dangerously so.

A COLD FRONT dropped down into East Georgia unexpectedly on Friday. The phone was ringing when she let herself into her home.

To her delight it was the president of All Seasons Greeting Cards, Inc.,

congratulating her. The entry Mr. Harris had selected for the annual competition had been one of Grace's valentine designs, both artwork and verse, and it had won first place!

"You've made my day, Mr. Harris—my whole week. In fact, my whole year!" Elated, she rattled on until Claude Harris pleaded another call.

She dialed swiftly, then listened to the distant *burr, burr*, picturing the austere blue, gray and white foyer of her parents' house. The colonel answered, his voice a testy growl.

"Daddy, it's me—Grace."

He interrupted her. "Your mother's with her board members. Some silly new female cause she's got herself mixed up with. She'll call you later, and now, if there's nothing else, I'm late."

She slowly placed the phone in its cradle, dismissing the momentary blight her father's lack of interest had created. She turned to one of the cats, who was contentedly curling her claws in and out of a crewel-embroidered pillow. "Have you heard the big news, Miss Maudie? One of my designs won a top national contest and I'm to be awarded the phenomenal sum of one hundred and twenty-five smackeroos, not to mention one genuine rayon satin rosette."

*

A DISMAL gray rain was drumming down on the metal roof when Grace woke up on Saturday morning. She decided to hurry and get her bath before the water rose any higher. The bathroom always sunk first. Somewhere along the line the owner had

tacked on a rudimentary bathroom by closing in a corner of what had been a back porch, but the house was at least sixty years old and it had been slowly sinking into the ground all those years.

Half a mile or so in either direction fancy new homes were going up, and Grace feared for her small, private domain. Even in its genteel shabbiness, the little frame house had a warmth that she had never found in any of her previous homes. Not the military housing on the various bases, nor the big square two-story house her father had bought after he retired, nor the two sparsely furnished rooms she had lived in while she worked to put herself through business school.

Still, something was going to have to be done or the back part of the house was going to float off down the Back River one of these fine days. Without waiting to eat breakfast, she dialed the agent who handled the property and outlined her situation.

"You understand, Miss Spencer, that the property you rent for next to nothing should have been condemned years ago. Sooner or later the whole area will be cleared for development."

"Well, meanwhile, Mr. Ogleby, I'm in danger of washing away."

"Yes, well, all right, Miss Spencer, I'll see if the owner wants to bother with fixing it up."

She made herself some breakfast and took it into the back living room. Curling her feet under her on the sofa, she snapped open her briefcase and took out the sheaf of original verses that had accumu-

lated over the past year. She submitted word-processed editions to accompany her carefully rendered illustrations, but she retained the original verses, initialed with the tiny "GBS," and the field drawings.

They were supposed to be in order, but they weren't. Just when had she been so careless?

The delicate, old-fashioned drawing she had done for the prize-winning valentine had pink roses, tiny wild irises and forget-me-nots that formed a heart shape that had been edged with paper lace. She quoted the verse from memory:

"Rose pink are your lips, my
love,
Iris blue, your eyes.
Forget-me-not, for in your
hands
My happiness yet lies."

Feeling the beginnings of a burst of creative energy, she uncapped her fountain pen.

By noon the rain had slackened and a watery, lemon-colored sun timidly fingered the trailing clouds. She heard a vehicle drive into the yard and cut the engine.

The whole house registered the heavy footsteps crossing the front porch, and by the time the screened door rattled under a summoning fist, Grace was already there, a feeling of numbed certainty creeping over her.

"What are you doing here?" She held the door open a cautious six inches as she peered through at the man outside. The hard hat was missing and instead he held a battered Stetson in his hand as he leaned

with one arm against the side of her house.

"I've come to fix your plumbing, Miss Spencer," he told her. The way those appreciative eyes moved over her made her uncomfortably conscious of the fact that her newly shampooed hair was still unconfined, and the knit shirt and faded jeans clung far too faithfully to her body.

"It's certainly not a bulldozer job, and how did you know my name, anyway? Who are you, anyway, Mr. . . ."

"Donovan, Miss Spencer, and in case you wondered, Ogleby sent me."

Just for an instant there was a gleam of something that struck her oddly in those dark, enigmatic eyes, and then it was gone.

"All right, Mr. Donovan. The problem is easy enough to recognize if you'll just go on around to the back. I'll be inside if you should need anything. Oh, one thing," she added. "Send your bill to the rental agency, if you don't mind. I promise you, if Mr. Ogleby can't collect from the owner, I'll be glad to pay your going rate." She closed the door firmly and leaned back against it, blowing a strand of brown hair off her forehead.

Pacing from room to room, she cleaned up everything in sight in an effort to work off some of her restlessness.

The phone rang as she was tugging on her rubber boots, and she answered it to hear Elliot confirming their date. "Elliot, I'd really like to go to that new place over on Lanier Island. I've heard they have a

band on Saturday nights, and I haven't danced in years!" She could picture his expression as his brain clicked out the probable cost of such an evening. "Elliot? Why don't we make it my treat?"

The sound of a clearing throat came over the line. "That won't be necessary, Grace. If you'd like to go there, of course I'll take you—that is, if I can get reservations this late," he added.

Elliot asked little enough of her on their weekly dates—just a sympathetic ear for his indignation over the practical jokes his math students played on him, and an occasional murmur as he recited his mother's opinions on just about everything. Even his good-night kiss asked nothing of her—which was all on the plus side, wasn't it?

She pulled on a bulky wool sweater, collected her portfolio and stepped out the back door. Donovan had stripped off his shirt, and with each movement of those brawny arms as he deepened the canal that led away from her house, his powerful muscles gleamed in the pale sunlight.

He leaned on his shovel and wiped a hand across his wet brow. Even in early December it could be hot when you were shoveling wet dirt.

"Would you like something to drink?" Compunction made her inquire.

"I'd really enjoy a cup of hot coffee." His eyes were softly wistful. With a sigh she nodded and turned to go back into the kitchen. "I'll just step in here and clean up a bit," he said from behind her. The bathroom and kitchen doors were only a

few feet apart across a tiny vestibule that was all that was left of the back porch.

She had a subliminal vision of his large tanned hands touching her personal belongings, and it brought a distinctly hollow feeling to her middle.

The kettle was at a boil when he appeared in the kitchen, almost filling the opening. Taking a deep, steadying breath, Grace reached for two small mugs.

"When's the last time you had your chimney inspected?"

Thrown off base by the unexpected question, Grace stared at him blankly. "My—why... I suppose Uncle Henry had it done."

"I'll send someone out next week," he said in his soft baritone drawl.

"Look, I'm sure you mean well, Mr. Donovan."

"Call me Quinn."

"Mr. Donovan," she stressed determinedly, "but if I need a handyman, I'm sure Mr. Ogleby can find—"

"Clark Ogleby couldn't find his glasses if they were on top of his head." He leaned back and smiled sweetly at her. "There's a new supper club that's opened up over on Lanier Island. How'd you like to try it out tonight?"

"I've heard about it." She watched his eyes warm with anticipation and then continued, almost reluctantly, "My date is taking me there tonight."

Fleeting expressions of disappointment crossed his face, but then the familiar 220-volt smile flashed on again. "Right. I thank you kindly

for the coffee, ma'am. I think you were on your way somewhere." His smile was just as wide, just as attractive, but there was a subtle difference—a hardness behind it that made Grace suddenly realize that for all his easygoing manners, here was a man who'd be dangerous to cross.

She watched him duck out through the back door.

ELLIOT WAS precisely on time, as usual, and Grace greeted him at the door. He looked thoroughly taken aback.

"Grace? Am I too early? You haven't fixed your hair."

"I thought I'd just leave it down for a change, but if it bothers you...?"

"No—I— No, that is... I'll help you with your wrap."

The supper club was crowded. She caught a glimpse of them both in a mirror as they made their way to the table and was startled. She hardly recognized the slender girl in the short, swirling dress and the flowing, leaf-brown hair. To her amusement, Elliot was still slightly disapproving of her metamorphosis. After all, what would Mother think?

She ordered from the right-hand side of the menu, selecting the least expensive entrée, and sipped her modestly priced white wine.

Grace spied a broad back and a familiar set of shoulders while on the dance floor with Elliot. There was no mistaking the crop of dark curls, nor could she miss the slender, silver-tipped fingers that were reaching around his shoulder to tease the strip

of tanned skin that showed between the black curls and the pristine shirt.

She was dismayed to realize that her heart was beating far too rapidly. More dismaying still, she wasn't all that shocked to see him there. It was almost as if she had been expecting him.

For the next half hour she concentrated her attention on her broiled flounder, red rice and salad. Elliot talked between courses, reminding her of his mother's invitation to Sunday dinner.

"She likes you, you know."

She saw Elliot's gaze go beyond her and up—and up and up. Grace turned. Struggling against the spell of that suspiciously benign smile, Grace made sketchy introductions. "Elliot, Mr. Donovan. Mr. Donovan, Elliot Rand." Let them sort it out between them if they wanted more.

Donovan extended his hand. "Bland—glad to meet you. I won't keep y'all, but I wanted to apologize to Pigtails here for leaving such a mess in her bathroom." He turned his guileless gaze on Grace. "Next time I'll bring my own towels, honey. You folks have a good time. See you."

He was gone. Grace stared after him, her mouth slightly agape, and watched while an auburn-haired girl with a hard sort of prettiness welcomed him back to their table. It was several moments before she turned back to Elliot, and then her eyes widened. Elliot, jealous? No. Elliot, of course, would go right home and relate the whole incident to his mother. Grace could hear her now: "She's not our kind of people, El-

liot, dear. After all, a woman who lives *alone*, and in *that* neighborhood..."

She gathered up her purse and tucked her hair back behind her ears. "I'm afraid I can't make Sunday dinner—thank your mother for me, though, will you?"

"Perhaps another time," Elliot said stiffly, escorting her out to the car. Both of them knew there would probably not be another time, and Grace was amazed at the feeling of lightness she felt.

DECEMBER fluctuated from tropical balminess to shivering chilliness to the impenetrable fogs that could drift in so swiftly over the hundreds of square miles of marshland.

Holiday fever had set in at school. The discipline problem threatened to get altogether out of hand. It had been Terri—she was certain of that—who had left the X-rated book in her top drawer, and the whole room had rocked with laughter while Grace had burned, then blanched, then burned again. How could her father have handled insubordination, disrespect—ridicule?

Carly Johns had actually looked embarrassed at some of Terri's more outrageous jokes at Grace's expense. Perhaps the girls would settle down after Christmas.

Saturday dawned with a promise of mildness. As she sipped coffee she glanced through the bills, and it occurred to her that she had heard nothing from either Ogleby or Donovan about the ditching that had been done in her backyard to channel off rainwater.

She ripped a page from her lined tablet and jotted a note to Mr. Ogleby to the effect that the work was satisfactory and as she hadn't heard from him, she assumed the owner had agreed to pay for the improvement. She signed her name, Grace B. Spencer, with a flourish. There had been a time when she would have taken the absence of a bill as proof that she didn't owe anything, but not anymore.

The slight breeze that rustled through the reeds was a whispered enticement as Grace stood in the opened back door. Amazing how the ever-changing sea of reeds and rushes that bordered practically all of Georgia's coastline had become so dear to her.

She left to saunter along the narrow, winding road that separated the woods from the marshes and rounded the last curve before reaching her destination—and her jaw fell in stunned disbelief. She let fly an oath she had once heard a Marine sergeant use and glared at the line of red flags that led her affronted eye directly to the hatefully familiar blue truck. "QD!" she exclaimed, consigning the whole outfit to perdition. And then her mind connected the man, Donovan, with the words. *QD. Quinn Donovan. Quinn Donovan Engineering.*

"Oh, rats!"

She felt something cold and wet nudge her back, and she jumped and whirled around to confront a sleek brown dog. Grace started to laugh, and the dog tilted its head inquiringly and nosed into her paper bag of crackers and liver pâté.

"Be my guest," Grace offered and unwrapped the lunch.

The dog devoured the works, circled twice and curled up with her nose close to the torn paper bag.

Grace dropped onto her knees and elbows and studied a flat rosette of curly leaves she found growing under the tall dried grass.

"I don't know about the view from where you are, honey, but from here it's spectacular."

She twisted around. Quinn Donovan had no business being so light on his feet! "Do you make a habit of sneaking up and spying on people? And why didn't you tell me who you were!"

He retorted, "Do you make a habit of kidnapping a man's dog and holding her captive when he's doing his best to train her?" He lifted one of those wicked eyebrows and she stared at him, completely losing the train of conversation. Then he turned to the pup. "Mollie, you old scoundrel, have you been moochin' again?" He tugged the dog's ears affectionately and shook his head in mock despair. "My neighbors can't have a barbecue without telling me ahead of time so I can lock this thieving hound up."

Grace laughed. When he told her that he had a standing policy of feeding all of Mollie's victims, she was shamefully easy to persuade. "Gives me a perfect opportunity to show off my hand with Brunswick Stew," he said.

THEY HIKE along the winding trail to the truck, and Quinn told her that the red flags were staking out a hid-

den creek. "We're studying the feasibility of draining this piece."

Grace closed her mind to the impact development would have on her domain.

They turned off a narrow blacktop onto a shelled driveway that wound through tall, straight pines and enormous live oaks, dripping with graybeards of moss. Both the site and the partially finished house bespoke a surprisingly cultivated taste, as well as the means to support it.

Inside Quinn invited her to make herself at home. The large, open space seemed to combine living, sleeping and dining facilities.

Grace crossed the dark, softly gleaming pine floor and found herself in a compact bathroom. A sweat-stained khaki shirt hung from a hook and without thinking, she reached out and touched it. Hurriedly she splashed her hands and face and left the intimate room.

"Won't be long now," Quinn called out. He emerged with a handful of silver to find her studying one of the paintings on the wall. "Like it? Edward, my youngest brother, did them. These were some of his earlier works, before he started making all the juried shows. I can't afford him now."

The conversation followed easily from her question about his other brothers and sisters, and she discovered that Quinn was the oldest of seven. He told her readily enough that all but Edward were married and caught up with families, careers or both.

The ambrosial Brunswick Stew had been served hot from the oven.

He grinned across the satin surface of a sturdy walnut table. The wine sent a glow of warmth stealing up over her face. He was remarkably good company.

Quinn reached out to touch the tip of her nose. It burned like fire. "You have an impertinent nose, Grace Spencer. With your dreamer's eyes, it makes an intriguing combination. Did you honestly think you could disguise them by dressing like a prison matron and screwing your hair up into a hard knot?"

His hand fell to her shoulder and lingered there. The few inches between them disappeared.

"Grace," he whispered, just before she felt the soft brush of his mustache and then the shattering touch of his mouth. It was a devastating act of possession. The solid warmth of his hard body was impressed on her every cell.

When his lips lifted, she managed to maneuver one hand between them and push. She shook her head frantically. "I think I'd better get out of here," she blurted.

The slow smile spread over his face, but some of the warmth was missing, as if he were already losing interest in her. "No problem. I've got an appointment in town anyway."

She reached for her sweater and portfolio. "I'm ready when you are," she told him.

Not until he pulled up in front of her house and cut the engine did it occur to Grace that she still didn't know any more about Quinn Donovan than the fact that he was one of seven children, and that was hardly relevant.

Adopting her most effective schoolmarm tone, she said, "Thank you for the meal, Quinn. I won't ask you in, since you have an appointment."

He nodded perfunctorily. His usual smile was noticeably absent, and there was a look about his shuttered eyes that Grace interpreted as ennui.

She let herself in the front door as the long, low sports car snarled away. It was almost six, late for a regular business appointment, and anyway, who kept business appointments on a Saturday evening? He was probably headed to see his hard-edged lady friend.

The feelings that were beginning to assail her now bore no resemblance to those she had felt for Don so long ago. She had been a girl then—heedless, impressionable and terribly vulnerable. Now she was a woman—heedless, impressionable and, she feared, more vulnerable than ever.

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"GRACE, DEAR, if you'd only told us, I'm sure we could have made other arrangements," her mother apologized, and Grace murmured something to the effect that it wasn't important, that she had several options for the Christmas holidays. Her mother latched on to the mutual face-saver with obvious relief. "Oh, aren't you the lucky one?"

Not even to herself would she admit to being hurt by her parents' lack of welcome—other guests, not enough bedrooms to go around, were pretty weak excuses to her way

of thinking. A militant sparkle in her eyes, Grace hung up.

Before she could unclamp her fingers from the phone, someone banged peremptorily on the door and she shook off her dismay and hurried through to answer the summons.

"What are you doing here?"

Quinn braced himself against the brash green clapboard siding and beamed at her. "Good morning to you, too, honey."

It had been over a week since she had seen him, and the spell of his potent masculine magnetism returned full force now. She stood back helplessly as he opened the screen door and came inside.

"What do you want?" she blurted.

"Invite me into your parlor for a cup of coffee and maybe I'll tell you what I want." He was grinning—fatuously, Grace decided, and she blew impatiently at a strand of hair as she moved aside.

The astounding nerve of the man, she bristled five minutes later. He invited himself in for coffee and then had the nerve to criticize just because she had left the morning's brew on the woodstove to stay warm! His tautly muscled body was perfectly relaxed on her sofa. He had talked with infuriating blandness about the weather, the economic impact of the closing of a large local plant and the recent decline in the shrimp harvest. Eyeing his half-empty mug meaningfully, Grace waited for him to come to the point of his visit.

"When do you break for the holidays?" he asked, and she told him

she'd be free as of Thursday. He continued, "You're going home to the frozen North?"

"No."

He lifted one of those darkly mocking eyebrows. "I was going to invite you to spend Christmas with me," he said to her utter astonishment.

"Why on earth would you do that?"

He shrugged. "Guess it just occurred to me that you might enjoy it."

As she stared at him in amazement a dull flush rose over his hard-hewn features, and Grace found herself scrambling madly to regain her balance at the erratic swing of her emotions. Just when she thought she had him figured out . . . !

"Well, thank you, Quinn, but of course, it's out of the question." Darn! She sounded so prim—so mealymouthed! To cover her confusion, she stood and reached abruptly for his mug. One of his hands closed around her wrist like a warm, solicitous manacle, and she tugged impatiently. "Quinn, don't be childish!"

But there was nothing at all childish about the touch of his iron-hard hand. He tugged her off balance so that she fell into his lap. And then his mouth came down to shut off her indignant protest.

Reaching up to push him away, she felt the muscular swell of his pectorals. Inside her something fluttered fiercely. "Quinn. Quinn, please."

"Yes, Grace." He sighed softly.

That wasn't what she meant! This was insane! She struggled against the

honeyed sweetness of her own inertia to escape the tender prison of his arms. He laughed down at her. A chilly doubt crept into her overheated consciousness. Was she wrong? No. There was an element of self-satisfaction, of...of *conspiracy* in that smile, almost as if they shared an amusing secret.

"Quinn?" she whispered uncertainly and scrambled away. He reached for her, but she escaped, her wary eyes never once leaving his face.

"What is it, Grace?" Some of the sureness seeped from his ebony eyes.

"You're absolutely insane! I politely reached for your cup and you grabbed me! And after barging in here uninvited in the first place!"

"Oh, honey, I was invited," he said, his voice softly ominous. "I'm a little too old to be playing games, but if that's the way you want it, then I guess I can go along with it."

"Playing games! Just because a—a bunch of schoolgirls think you're—you're—just don't make the mistake of believing every woman you meet is going to fall for all that—"

"All right, honey, I get the message—the real message, this time." That hateful grin mocked her. "Just what do you think? Did you expect me to swap sugary little verses with you?" The hard glitter of his eyes never left her while he stretched to ram his shirttail into his pants. "So if you've had your thrill-of-the-month, I'll be shoving off."

Before she could summon her wits to reply, he was gone.

FEBRUARY was not far off, and The Valentine would be hitting the market any day now. Mr. Harris reported that her sales were slowly increasing.

The second day back at school Donovan waylaid her before she could get across the parking lot.

"Morning, Grace."

She was astounded to see the familiar broad grin on his face, just as if he had never tried to seduce her.

She was about to wind up their meeting quickly when they were interrupted by Carly Johns.

"Hi, Miss Spencer." Carly had been absent the first day back at school, and Grace turned to her now with something of relief. "Carly, you weren't ill yesterday, were you?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. We went to Disney World after Christmas and we didn't get in until last night." Her eyes, soft as melted chocolate, kept drifting toward Donovan, and Grace had no choice but to introduce them. This she did, keeping it brief, but Quinn was not to be dismissed.

"Johns, huh? Charley Johns's little girl?" When Carly nodded, he added, "I'll bet he has to sweep the boys off the doormat when he comes home from work every day."

It was unforgivable, Grace decided, when she saw the effect of his outrageous flattery on the impressionable girl. Her derisive glance told him as much, and he bathed them both in the indiscriminate warmth of his wide grin. "Well, if you two lovely ladies will excuse me, I have an appointment with a county official who's dead set on hog-tyin' me with red tape."

"We'll try to bear up, Donovan," Grace retorted dryly.

"You do that, Spencer." She watched the unholy gleam rise up in his eyes to mock her. Beside her, Carly heaved a sigh of dramatic proportions. Grace happened to catch Carly's eye. To her surprise the younger girl's smile held the first note of real communication they had shared. It *would* have to be over Donovan! Still, it was a beginning.

"Oh, wow," Carly breathed reverently as they followed the narrow concrete walk. "Is he really for real, or not?"

"If he's not, then the sooner his batteries run down, the safer we'll all be," Grace admitted, holding the door for the student to enter.

Before they turned toward the classroom, Carly hesitated and Grace looked at her questioningly.

"Look, Miss Spencer—some of the girls—well, we thought it would be a neat trick to—" She broke off, her face flooding with color, and Grace glanced past her to see several of her students hurrying toward the room. "I'll tell you later," Carly mumbled and fled inside.

Whatever confidence Carly was about to share with her had to wait. Elliot came by at lunchtime and lingered, just as if he'd never snipped off their friendship.

DONOVAN turned up on her doorstep one Saturday morning in mid-January with unsettling news.

"It occurred to me, Grace, that with the price of a house well out of most folks' reach, it's downright wasteful to neglect one that could be

put into first-class shape with a little elbow grease."

Closing her eyes in a wordless prayer, Grace spun away and strode into her kitchen. Up to standards, indeed! It would take more than a lick of paint and a few snide remarks to bring this old house up to even minimum standards, and anyway, she wasn't at all sure she wanted it improved.

"Little darlin'?" he called solicitously.

"Donovan, if you call me little darling, or... or honey, or Pigtails one more time, I'm going to clobber you!" she seethed. "I'd sooner live in a dugout canoe than have to put up with your overbearing, condescending, *corn-pone charm!*"

He applauded softly. "Your vocabulary's coming right along, little—Grace," he amended. "Keep it up and I might wind up sending you a bouquet of roses and daisies." He grinned at her, his eyes lazy-lidded and deceptively slumberous.

Closing her mind to the sheer physical magnificence of the man, Grace took a deep, steadying breath. "You're cute, Donovan—just too cute for words," she snapped. The kitchen door, as usual, hung half-way open and she gave it a shove that sent it clattering against the wall.

"We'll fix that first," he promised her.

She began to run water in the sink. "I'll get these done before I leave."

"Where are you going?" he asked with perfect equanimity.

Agitating the suds into snowy mounds, she applied herself to her chore. "I don't think that's any business of yours."

The silence stretched the boundaries of comfort to the breaking point before Quinn said, "You call the shots, honey—I just try to accommodate you. Before you go, though, how about helping me with this door. It'll just take a minute to tighten up the hinges, and then I can get started on the back porch."

She finished the dishes, leaving them to drain, and presented herself to Quinn, who was doing something with a folding rule and a plumb bob. "All you have to do is lean against it while I replace these old screws." He positioned her where he wanted her.

He was so close that she could feel his breath against the side of her averted face. "Why can't you just prop the door closed with a chair?" she asked plaintively.

"Because, my lapis-eyed darlin', a chair's not nearly as exciting as a carpenter's helper."

When she tried to duck under his elbow, he blocked her with his body, pressing her heavily against the door. The proud thrust of his nose stroked the tip of hers, and his mustache brushed over her lips, her cheeks. When she could no longer bear her own distraught nerves, she moved that necessary fraction of an inch to find his mouth with hers. It was a sweet, mutual coercion that melted the last vestige of her resistance. In mere seconds tension had spread through his hard-muscled body, igniting a similar response in hers. His mouth lifted.

"Ahhh, Grace, honey, no more games—please." He lifted her face to his. "Your eyes, Grace, are as black as mine now. You can't deny the truth any more than I can."

His words, spoken in a hoarse whisper, so nearly echoed her own thoughts that Grace closed her eyes in relief. No, she couldn't deny it—didn't want to deny the power that surged between them like an arcing high-tension line. It was far stronger than reason.

Her lips parted for his invasion, and when the phone shrilled in the next room she blinked slowly, unable to understand for a moment what was happening. A shred of sanity fingered its way in through overwrought emotions.

"I'll take it off the hook," Quinn grated.

"No, I—that is, I'd better get it." Reacting instinctively, she slid away and grabbed up the phone.

"Give me Quinn," a terse feminine voice demanded, and Grace stared stupidly at the instrument.

"What is it? Grace? Who is it?" he demanded. His voice sounded as if it had not been used in a long time.

"It's for you—a woman," she said dully. She laid the phone carefully on the table, snatched up her purse and her portfolio and ran out the door.

After a while she found an uninhabited stretch of marshfront. Deliberately shutting out the haunting beauty of the mysterious marshes, she tried to concentrate on composing a verse for a Christmas card, but all that would come to mind were inane jingles about hearts and flowers.

Daisies have a secret;
Roses have one, too.

Listen with your heart, my dear,
They'll tell you I love you.

Good Lord, what had made her remember that one? It had been one of her first attempts at doing valentines—she had all but forgotten it. She'd just have to force herself to forget valentines and think fall—think Thanksgiving, think Halloween!

Halloween. All she could come up with was an image of wicked, dark eyes topped with Mephistophelian brows. In spite of herself, she smiled. How would Quinn like to see his face adorning a series of scary cards?

*

ON WEDNESDAY she had arranged a class trip. The law firm that had agreed to receive a small group had its offices in a complex that also housed several medical practices. While the law firm's receptionist was describing the possibilities of working as a legal secretary, an office manager was conducting the other group through the Medical Arts Center.

Grace, with half an hour to herself, arranged to meet the two groups at a nearby fast-food place and pushed through the heavy glass doors, squinting against the low-angled morning sun. Barely had the doors swung behind her than she felt an arm slide around her back. Quinn grinned down at her.

"Playing Mother Goose this morning?"

"Playing Mother...? Oh, I see what you mean." She answered his flashing smile with a reluctant one of her own.

"Have coffee with me," he commanded genially.

"I really don't have time."

"What were you planning to do while your little ducklings are being initiated into the mysteries of the real world?"

Stung by his derisive dismissal of her girls, she said, "My little ducklings, as you call them, are what make the so-called real world go around! I doubt very much that QD Engineering would function as smoothly without its office staff!"

"Margaret." And at her mystified look, he said, "My office staff—Margaret Phillips. Which reminds me, I'm having a get-together Friday evening, in the part of my house that's finished. I'd like for you and that friend of yours—forget his name, but the one with the nose designed to be looked down—to come."

"Elliot," she said before she could stop herself.

"You didn't have any trouble recognizing him from the description, did you?" His hand wrapped around her own. "About seven-thirty, all right? See you!" He spun away, leaving a mesmerized Grace staring after him.

AT FIRST Elliot refused even to consider the invitation. Then, when he realized Grace was going, either with or without him, he capitulated, telling her that for old times' sake he couldn't allow her to go to Donovan's house unescorted.

That Friday night Quinn threw open the door for them, gesturing expansively for them to come join the others. He slipped an arm around Grace's shoulders, but a woman in a long, sleeveless shift of navy blue inserted herself between

them. The same woman who had been with him at the supper club a month or so ago.

Grace's initial opinion of a rather hard prettiness was reinforced on closer inspection. Even as Quinn was introducing her and Elliot to Margaret Phillers, Grace was aware of one swift impression. Margaret Phillers was head over heels in love with her boss. She was unprepared for the swift shaft of pain that shot through her as she watched Margaret Phillers slant a confiding little smile up at Quinn. Then several people introduced themselves, and the evening began to gather momentum.

"Hi, you're Grace and I'm Edward, and I'm told you're something of an artist yourself."

She turned to confront a broad grin that was a younger, slightly lower voltage version of Quinn's. While the party milled around them, Edward regaled her with the course of his career as an artist and inquired into Grace's own endeavors along that line.

"I doodle," she admitted, "and am lucky enough to have found a market for some of my doodlings."

They were joined by another couple, and presently someone put on some music.

Quinn came up behind her. All night long she had managed to stay on opposite sides of the room from him. Margaret Phillers was sending hands-off signals to every female in range, with special emphasis on Grace.

He drew her skillfully into his arms as someone put on another tape.

She felt herself falling under the spell of his potent magnetism, prey to all the old familiar longings she had tried so hard to deny. They found themselves beside the sliding glass doors when the music ended, and Quinn led her through, out onto the open-sided corridor that led to the unfinished part of the building. "Come see my home," he invited.

He showed her through a jungle of rafters and joists, studs and empty window frames.

"Watch that two-by-four," Quinn warned just as Grace caught her shin on it. She doubled over in pain and Quinn scooped her up, holding her against him.

"Oh, my, you are tantalizing," he whispered as he planted tiny kisses along her throat. "When are you going to send me another love letter?"

The words ricocheted around in her mind, as the glass doors slid open and they were approached by at least half the party. Quinn warned his guests about the various hazards. "Poor Grace has already lost a leg to one of my braces."

Grace was pretty certain that the auburn-haired girl had been leading the pack when they had come through the door and scented their quarry.

The party broke up soon afterward, but not before Edward had invited her to attend the opening of his one-man show in Atlanta the following weekend.

Grace was acutely conscious of Elliot's disapproving eyes on her as she tried to come up with an excuse. And then the phone rang and Mar-

garet hurried in to answer it. She summoned Quinn.

Grateful for the chance to escape, Grace said a hasty good-night. With her arm hooked securely in Elliot's, she hurried out to the familiar safety of his car.

Gradually her thoughts polarized on two facts; she was inescapably in love with Quinn Donovan, and he was the last man on earth she could trust with the keeping of her vulnerable heart.

He was too experienced, too sure of his own compelling attractiveness, too free with the casual endearments to be anything but an older, far more dangerous version of Don Franklin.

EDWARD CALLED the next morning, suggesting that they meet for lunch.

"Lunch," she repeated vacantly. "Sure. Why not?"

They ordered catfish sandwiches at the restaurant, and Grace found herself unexpectedly telling the young artist all about her work for All Seasons. "Tight little renditions, ticky-tacky jingles," she minimized self-consciously, and he insisted on seeing them for himself.

Actually Grace always carried a copy of The Valentine in her purse.

"I like your drawing—this old-fashioned-looking valentine thing, especially," he told her. "Who inspires such palpating sentiments? My freewheeling brother? You two raised a few eyebrows when you snuck out on the party last night. Poor Maggie was fit to be tied."

"I guess if anyone has the right to be upset, she does," she murmured, and waited for a rebuttal.

"Could be. He took her in five years ago and gave her a job, straightened out the mess she had made of her life." Edward shrugged. "Quinn has this overgrown sense of responsibility. He was landed with a king-size load of it before he was even out of high school. Our old man bowed out, and Mama, bless her, wasn't up to dealing with a houseful of little blessings on less than nothing." She felt almost guilty for allowing him to continue. "He hung around a construction site. Learned in the saddle. Before he was done, he had put us all through school." Edward's face reflected something of the admiration he felt for his brother, and Grace swallowed around the constricting lump in her throat.

"He waited until the last one of us was launched before he finally got his degree." A fleeting frown passed over Edward's attractive young features. "He didn't have much time for his own pleasures back in those days. I seem to remember a girl—Allie, or something unusual like that," he mused, and then, shook his head in dismissal of ancient history. "I was too wrapped up in my own affairs to pay much attention at the time. If Maggie loves him, it's no more than he deserves."

For a long while they just sat there, staring into the shaft of afternoon sunshine that filtered through the climbing plants in the window.

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SHE COULD still back out. Just because she had promised Edward she'd be there... Then Quinn phoned just as she was hurrying out the door

to school and offered her a ride to Atlanta on Saturday morning. "No point in taking two cars," he reasoned. "Besides, I haven't had time to ask how your battered shin is. You managed to get away before I could even speak to you the other night."

"You were busy."

"And you were suddenly in a terrific hurry," he drawled. "I'll pick you up about nine, then. We'll stay over and come back early Sunday afternoon. We'll have all the time in the world to talk on the long drive, and there are a few important things we have to clear up between us."

With that enticing proposition dangling before her, she was lost. And almost late for school.

If she had had trouble concentrating on her classwork before, she now found it impossible. Her sigh of relief at the class-break buzzer was plainly audible.

There was a blue truck pulling into the parking lot on the other side of the new dorm site. A QD truck. Another sigh gusted out into the empty classroom as Grace watched Quinn swing out of the cab.

A girl in pink overalls cut across campus to waylay Quinn as he strode onto the building site. Carly Johns, her brash red hair bouncing, had dashed up to stand panting before him, and while Grace watched, the girl talked and Quinn listened intently. His lips moved once, his distinctive brows lifted momentarily and then he placed his large, shapely hands on each side of Carly's face and kissed her on the forehead!

Grace wheeled away from the window. She entered the corridor just as Quinn came in the east door.

He called out to her, but she had caught a glimpse of Elliot, and she dashed off after him.

"Elliot! I haven't seen you lately," she greeted him.

"Not since the party..." His voice trailed off, and then, gathering determination, he plowed ahead. "I certainly hope I didn't foster any false impressions that day—" He broke off.

Grace impulsively reached up and kissed Elliot's soft, slightly pink cheek.

Grace turned away, her eyes unconsciously sweeping the crowded hallway. She was in time to see a towering, Stetson-topped head disappear through the east door.

By Saturday morning she was ready to prove her immunity both to Quinn and to herself.

She closed the door and locked it behind her when she heard the sports car crunch onto her shelled driveway. Quinn met her halfway across the front porch, a scowl on his face. He hooked her bag with a single finger and led her down the shallow steps, and only then did she see the slender, shapely arm resting on the passenger window.

"Will you have enough room in the back?" Quinn's voice was laced with what sounded like impatience. "Maggie gets carsick. She didn't think you'd mind."

By dint of a few extraordinary contortions she managed to insert herself into the minute space available.

By the time they reached Atlanta, Grace wondered if one could develop claustrophobia in a matter of a few hours. Dense fog was punctu-

ated only by the hazy gleam of slowly moving traffic as Quinn homed in on the hotel nearest the gallery.

It was an older hotel with a richly appointed interior. Margaret claimed to be starving, and Quinn looked queringly at Grace.

"Not for me, thanks. I'm going to soak the kinks out of my bones and then nap awhile."

"Come on, darling," Margaret insisted. "She's certainly old enough to look after herself, and I want to go shopping before tonight. There's a fantastic jewelry store right here in the hotel, and you haven't bought me my valentine yet."

Grace went to her room and took a nap until a soft rap on her door aroused her. She wriggled upright to scowl at the door and yanked the bedspread loose, swirling it about her like a king-size sari. "All right," she grumbled, opening the door.

He sauntered in, looking exhausted. Evidently a shopping trip with his girlfriend-secretary wasn't among the more restful ways to spend an afternoon.

"Did you find Margaret a proper valentine?" she sniffed, and then could have bit her tongue. It was exactly the sort of snide remark a jealous woman would make!

"She seemed to think so. Aren't you going to ask what I brought you?" he inquired with mild curiosity.

Her head came up, sleep-clouded eyes searching his face warily. "Why should you bring me anything?"

"Why shouldn't I?" He shifted his weight and dug into one of his pockets, coming up with a small,

domed leather box. The look he leveled at her was totally inscrutable as he handed it to her.

She swallowed convulsively, acutely conscious of his enigmatic gaze on her as she flipped open the small box. It was a pendant. Suspended from a flat, supple chain with a small gold cage encircling a heart fashioned of some strange, dark stone. The deep blue surface of the small heart gleamed with tiny flecks of gold.

"Lapis lazuli. Your stone. Didn't I tell you once that your eyes were the color of lapis?"

She looked up—right into the trap of his smiling eyes. "Quinn, I can't accept this. I mean, it's lovely—it's the most exquisite thing I've ever seen, but you know I can't—"

Like quicksilver, his mood reversed to poorly concealed impatience. He hunched his shoulders and wheeled away. "I'll buy you a box of fancy chocolates, then! Will your silly, hypocritical principles allow you to accept that?"

She caught him just before he reached the door, stumbling on the enveloping folds of the bedspread. "Quinn, wait!" She tugged the spread up.

"I've waited a little too long as it is! I should have taken the bait the first time you threw it out, only it took me a while to discover who you were!" His hands closed over her shoulders. And then, as if he were confused or had remembered something unsettling, he shook his head. "I keep forgetting," he muttered under his breath, "that it wasn't you who sent me all those love letters," he grated.

Bewildered, she searched his narrowed eyes for a clue. "I sent you *what?*"

His eyes slid away. With a soft oath, he captured her mouth. His hands were everywhere, moving over her back to curve beneath her hips, stroking her satiny flanks. He found her breasts, crushing them softly with trembling restraint, and then he held her away, emitting a groan of raw agony. "Hell, Grace, are you deliberately trying to drive me over the edge? Look at you!"

She did. He had stepped back, raking a trembling hand through his unruly hair, and Grace swayed as he removed the support of his powerful arms. She took one stricken look at her own nakedness and closed her eyes.

"You'd better lower the voltage for that pasty-faced boyfriend of yours, or one of these days you're going to blow out his circuits!"

Her eyes were still closed tightly when she heard the door open and then close again, and the soft snick of the lock released the tears that could no longer be held back.

BY THE TIME she had dressed Grace was in an almost unnaturally calm frame of mind. It was interrupted by Margaret's voice calling through the door. "Grace? Are you ready yet? Quinn's in a rotten mood, so I wouldn't advise keeping him waiting."

Grace opened the door. The other woman was stunningly overdressed in dark green satin harem pants with a gold lamé halter and jacket. In her ears were enormous, barbaric cubes

of gold, studded with small, dark green stones. Emeralds?

"Like them? An early valentine."

"Lovely. They match your outfit beautifully."

"That's what Quinn thought," Margaret retorted smugly.

Grace's eyes moved involuntarily to the small, domed box on her dresser, and Margaret, following her gaze, reached for it, flipping it open. "Oh, aren't you going to wear yours? I told Quinn it would be embarrassing not to have something for you, since you happened to be our guest this weekend. Don't tell me you don't like my taste in costume jewelry. I thought it was so cute!" Her small laugh rippled out into the tense atmosphere.

With the unnatural calmness that had accompanied her every action for the past half hour or so, Grace lifted the fragile chain from its bed of white satin and fastened it on, feeling the coldness of the metal and stone steal the warmth from the intimate valley between her breasts. She gathered up her gloves and purse and led the way out.

In the brightly lighted gallery Edward extricated himself from the small group of well-dressed patrons and hurried to meet her. He was leading her across the room to a grouping of small silverpoint drawings when they were intercepted by a tall, heavyset man who had evidently been sampling the liquid refreshments.

"This is absolutely the biggest load of hogwash I've seen this side of a pig farm, Eddie baby."

Grace almost lost her grasp on the slender stem of her wineglass. The

young artist laughed and clapped the offender on the shoulder. "You'd be the expert on that subject, you ol' son of a gun. Grace, this lecherous sot is my good friend Farnum Taylor, the Fourth. As if the first three weren't enough, his folks had to go and commit the ultimate folly. Folly, meet Grace Spencer—artist, poet and all-around inspiration who braved the fog to be with me in my moment of stark terror."

Farnum, who, to Grace's amusement, actually answered to Folly, accompanied them on their tour of the show. Someone claimed Edward's attention, and Grace and Folly moved on. The talk gradually shifted from art to other topics, and Grace was grateful not to be left on her own while Edward held court.

Through a break in the crowd she caught sight of Quinn. He seemed to grow more morose as the evening wore on, and more than once she felt the impact of his lacerating gaze as she laughed at some outrageous remark of Folly's. Margaret was never more than three feet away from him, which made it all the more surprising when the tall, auburn-haired woman slipped quickly into the lady's lounge behind her.

The door closed quietly and Margaret heaved an overdone sigh. She flopped on a pink leatherette sofa and said, "Is Folly giving you a lift home tonight? He told me he planned to drive back tonight and get an early start, and I'm sure he'd love to have company on the long drive home."

"Yes, but the fog..." Grace said doubtfully. "I don't think..."

"Folly could find his way through solid concrete," Margaret an-

nounced. "Besides, you'd be on your own tomorrow. Quinn and I usually sleep late when we manage to slip away for a weekend." She laughed and the sound rippled unpleasantly across Grace's nerves. "But if you don't mind hanging around on your own—we usually have breakfast in our room."

Our room. *Our* room! The words rang in Grace's head. She forced her voice into a semblance of carelessness and said, "Oh, then don't worry about me!"

The way back to the main gallery led directly past the bar, and Grace helped herself to a fresh drink as she passed. Arranging a brilliant smile on her face, she turned to locate Folly and proceeded to walk blindly into Quinn. The wine sloshed over the rim of her glass.

"You're overdoing it, Grace."

"Yes, Mr. Donovan, whatever you say, Mr. Donovan. Go to the devil, Mr. Donovan." The words were sweetly spoken, and then she turned and wandered off, her head at an uncomfortably high angle.

"You were saying?" Folly questioned, coming up behind her to drape a heavy arm across her shoulders.

"I was saying I'd give anything to be able to get back to Brunswick tonight instead of hanging around until Quinn feels like leaving tomorrow." There! She had committed herself; the next move was up to Folly.

Four hours later she was telling herself bitterly that she *ought* to be committed! Somehow, though, the nightmare trip came to an end. It

had been a night out of time, an experience Grace could hardly believe she had undergone as Folly deposited her bag on the doorstep.

"Gotcha here safe an' sound, huh? Rain or snow, hail or fog, ol' Folly always delivers. Say—you couldn't come up with a cuppa coffee for the road, could you? Those last few miles are killers!"

Closing her eyes on the urge to scream, she said, "Sure, if instant will do."

The house was thoroughly chilled. Grace went out to the kitchen in her coat and put the kettle on to boil. She went back into the living room to strike a match to the wad of newspapers in the bottom of the stove. She found, to her consternation, that Folly had removed his leather topcoat and his shoes and was stretched out under her granny afghan on the yellow sofa, sound asleep.

"Oh, rats!" She wheeled away, leaving the fire unlighted, and switched off the kettle. Coffee could wait. There'd be no point in even trying to wake him now.

She ought to have her head examined for accompanying him, she jeered. She went to her room and crawled wearily under the covers.

Sometime later she awakened by the sound of something falling, followed by a stream of highly original profanity. "Where the blasted devil is the bathroom?" Folly cried patetically.

"Oh, Folly, stop screeching. It's on the back porch!" She got up and made her way out to the kitchen to plug in the kettle... again. She was actually whistling tunelessly under

her breath when Folly lurched back into the room.

He cast her a speaking look. "Just get some coffee in me and I'll see if I can make it out to Jekyll. I've got to fly a blooming plane back and then go on to Cincinnati before tonight."

She was handing him a steaming mug of black coffee when the back door burst open and Quinn appeared, looking almost as wretched as poor Folly.

Of the three of them it was Folly who recovered the use of his tongue first. "Howdy, Quinn baby."

"Would you mind telling me exactly what's going on here?" Quinn enunciated slowly. Each word was released as carefully as if it were riding on a bed of TNT.

"I'm getting my head put back together, and this little angel here—what was your name, honey?" the seated man asked plaintively.

Grace blinked in disbelief.

Before she could protest, Quinn lifted the other man and frogmarched him toward the front door, collecting his coat and shoes as they went. He opened the door, ejected the foolishly grinning Folly and tossed his belongings after him.

Then he turned to Grace. It took only one glance at the implacable set of Quinn's jaw to assure her that escape was out of the question. No five-star general she had ever met carried himself with more of an air of command!

With two great strides he was standing in front of her.

"Do you have any idea of what went through my mind when Maggie told me you and that—that lush had left together in that fog? God!"

His eyes closed momentarily, then opened to move over her in an anguished sweep. "Woman, you need a keeper!"

It was the wrong thing to say. She took a deep, steadying breath and then began to speak—grimly, flatly. "Let's get something straight—I don't answer to you. I don't answer to any man, not ever again. If you were worried, then I'm sorry. I didn't know he was in such bad shape. I'm sorry. I ruined your weekend for you by barging in where I wasn't wanted in the first place, and then, when I tried to back out and leave you two some time together, I only made matters worse! So sue me! I don't need you telling me when to stand and when to sit down! I grew up with that sort of male domination and I'm not about to take any more of it!"

At first, when Quinn repeated her words, she didn't recognize them. "Our weekend? Just whose weekend did you think it was supposed to be, Grace?"

"Yours. Yours and Margaret's, and there's no supposing about it!"

He raised a hand to his forehead, massaging the furrows that had suddenly appeared there. "Margaret." He sighed, and something in the resigned way he said the name brought a tight fist to close sickeningly around her stomach.

"There's something you need to see. Maybe after, we can talk without the fireworks." He smiled at her tiredly.

*

MOLLIE TROTTED around the house to greet them as Grace followed Quinn to the door. Since she had last seen his place, the windows had been installed in the main house.

He crossed to one of the built-in cabinets that formed the storage wall and removed a sheaf of papers.

She lowered her eyes to the crisp copy. "*Rose pink are your lips, my love, Iris blue, your eyes. Forget-me-nots, for in your hands, My happiness yet lies.*" The words, written in her distinctive handwriting and initialed with the small GBS, were flawless photocopies. "From your Secret Admirer" was written in blue ink. Oh, Lord!

She set it aside and read another. The signature, this time, was a skillful copy of her own first name. "Yours lovingly, Grace."

With numbed fingers she reached for yet another one and read the familiar lines. "*Daisies have a secret; Roses have one, too. Listen with your heart, my dear, They'll tell you I love you.*"

Dropping the paper onto the small pile, she closed her eyes. All the secret glances, the quickly hushed giggles among the girls at school, came back to her. With a low, anguished groan her thoughts turned in another direction. Quinn must have thought she was desperate for any man's attention!

"You do know that I had nothing to do with giving you these, don't you?" she muttered.

"After a while it occurred to me that the real author wouldn't have mailed me photocopies—unless she

had a heart like a boomerang." His grin was almost up to his old standards. "But when Ogleby forwarded your letter about the sunken bathroom, I recognized the handwriting. You make your G's in a unique way. Back when the first one came, I was amused. That was the secret admirer version. When they kept on coming, one or two a week, I was intrigued, and I was determined to find out who sent them. By the time I got the note from Ogleby, I had—well, you might say, run into you a few times, and I was more intrigued than ever. In the first place you hardly seemed the type. All hedgehog prickles—you certainly didn't seem to think much of me at close range. Even so, I couldn't figure out why you seemed to blow hot and then cold."

"Oh, Lord," Grace mumbled, hiding her face.

"For the life of me, I didn't know whether I was coming or going." He tipped his chair back at a perilous angle. "The thing was, I'd erected this... well, you might say, a barricade, over the years. Oh, I like women as well as the next man."

He grinned that overwhelming grin of his, and Grace felt her defense systems shutting down, one after another. "But, you see, something happened when I was still pretty damp behind the ears. I stuck out my thick neck and had it chopped off by a little gal I sort of fancied at the time. Figured after that I'd be better off playing by a certain set of rules."

Desperately Grace tried to marshal all the reasons why she couldn't afford to succumb to his spell.

"Only I hadn't figured on anything like you." He took her arm and urged her body toward his.

"Honey, I want you. And before you open that stubborn mouth of yours, I'd better make something else clear to you."

The stubborn mouth was open, all right—hanging from its hinges.

"My family are all scattered around now, busy with their own affairs, but that doesn't mean they aren't my family. I'm building a home large enough so that if any of them ever need a bolt hole, they'll have it. I want 'em to feel free to get together here on Christmas and Thanksgiving. My lady will have to accept the fact that just because I love her to the ends of the earth and then some, that doesn't mean I love them any the less."

Grace couldn't have spoken then if her life depended on it.

"So you see, Grace, it has to be a wholehearted commitment. I can only ask you to make the effort—if you care for me enough."

Somehow she managed to get the words past the lump in her throat. "If I *care* enough! Oh, Quinn, don't you honestly know?"

"Honey, if I did I wouldn't have gone through what I went through last night." Grace caught a glimpse of the agony he referred to before the control came down over his melting dark eyes, and it staggered her. "I dumped poor old Maggie out on her front stoop and came charging out to your place breathing fire!"

It was all she could do not to wrap her arms around his waist and bury her head in the strength and security of his arms. Not yet, though—a ves-

tige of wariness held her back from committing herself fully. "About Margaret," she began.

"Margaret." He sighed. "My whole weekend began to go sour when Margaret invited herself along. And then you rejected the special valentine I had made for you by a goldsmith in Savannah."

Her lapis heart!

He laughed in half-rueful embarrassment. "Nothing worked out the way I'd planned it. There were all these other fellows hanging around you—I saw red, and believe me, sweetheart, it wasn't valentines! I'd felt like taking your old boyfriend, Rand, apart that day when I saw you kiss him."

She had to break in then. "I saw you kiss Carly just before—"

"Carly Johns? Grace, the poor tad was in tears. When that poor little redhead owned up to sending the poems, I kissed her to keep from spanking her."

His hands were tracing patterns on the sides of her neck. Grace tried to control her crazy impulses. There were one or two things that had to be cleared away.

"Quinn, are you sure there's nothing between you and Maggie? A man doesn't normally give his secretary emeralds unless—"

"Emeralds! You mean those green glass things she picked out? Well, as a matter of fact, I felt a little embarrassed because I had had the heart made for you—I was planning on it

being an engagement present. If she'd offered to take herself off somewhere, I'd have bought her the store." He grinned, slowly releasing a button on her blouse.

The last of her doubts drifted into nothingness. "Oh, Quinn, when it comes to loving, you've met your match. As big as you are, I'm not sure you're big enough to handle all the love I have for you."

The gauntlet was down. He picked it up. "Starting now, you're going to prove your words. That ought to take a couple of decades, at least, and then we'll need a few more for me to prove mine, so we'd better not wait around too long to get started. There's no waiting before or after a marriage license in the state of Georgia, you know."

His hands were making slow, soothing movements on her body that were anything but soothing! She raked her fingernails down the powerful muscles of his back, delighting in his immediate response. "Say it, Quinn—you haven't told me yet." With every look, every touch of his hands, he was telling her, but she needed to hear the words.

When her beseeching eyes moved past his aggressive chin, past the stern, yet tender mouth, the sensuous brush of his mustache and the proud thrust of his nose, to the melting warmth of his dark eyes, he whispered, "Listen with your heart, beloved."






**EMILIE
RICHARDS**
**Gilding
the Lily**



Lesley Belmont had never thought of herself
as a beautiful or desirable woman, but to
Travis Hagers she was devastating....



Lesley Janet Belmont waved goodbye to the old farmer as his pickup rumbled over the hill. With an uncharacteristic display of annoyance, she kicked the spare tire that was now firmly at home on the rear wheel of her car, thanks to him. She was late. Very late.

"I hope this Travis Hagen is a patient man," she grunted as she got into the car and started the engine.

It had just been that kind of day. First, she had awakened late. Then the frozen waffle she'd pulled from the freezer as an emergency breakfast had remained slightly frozen as she gulped it down.

But the worst thing about the morning had been knowing that she, who specialized in interacting only with microfilm and dusty tomes, was going to be forced to spend this lovely spring day interviewing southwestern Virginia's most famous playboy. "My biorhythms have completely lost the beat," she muttered.

She gripped the steering wheel tightly in exasperation. According to her calculations she had less than a mile to go. A lock of red-brown hair escaped the knot at the back of her head as she continued her search for the correct driveway. Now, on top of everything else that had gone wrong that day, she realized that she had in all probability passed her destination.

Lesley pulled the little car to the side of the road, this time to consult the hand-drawn map at her side. Little impish creatures were sprinkled over the labyrinth of winding lines representing county roads.

Lesley jerked the steering wheel and headed back up the road she had just traveled, making a sharp right onto a gravel drive and heading down into what appeared to be nothing but woods. "Don't give up the fight; there's a house in sight," read the caption placed on the map in the vicinity of the driveway Lesley was attempting to maneuver.

The clearing, when she reached it, was a surprise. The house she had been seeking was nestled on the side of the mountain among the trees. The view was breathtaking. The structure was constructed of native stone and giant hand-hewn logs. There were windows visible everywhere and a series of decks wrapped around the house. Several outbuildings built from weathered barn boards were set at a distance from the house. What did this house have to do with a man who drew silly maps and wrote one of the most beloved comic strips in America?

Lesley stepped unwillingly out of the car, climbing the short path to the house. There were giant maple and tulip poplar trees but nothing else was planted close to the house. It was almost as if after building this

magnificent structure, someone had lost his enthusiasm.

The sound of the door opening chased all thoughts of landscaping out of Lesley's head. Leaning against the doorframe, munching on a sandwich, was a man so interesting to look at that for a moment she entirely forgot to be shy.

In his early thirties and more than six feet tall, Travis Hagen had a deep tan that set off surprisingly blue eyes, and his light brown, sun-streaked hair fell onto his forehead. He was apparently amused to see her.

Hesitating, she extended her hand. "Hello, Mr. Hagen. I'm Lesley Belmont from the Christiansburg College Department of Mass Communications." She was jolted by the warmth of the big hand holding hers.

"Well, Miss Belmont, you're quite a surprise." Travis Hagen's eyes burned a slow trail down from her dark glasses to her well shaped but clumsily covered body.

She contented herself with trying to return the stare that she perceived as insolent at best.

"I hope you were expecting me, Mr. Hagen," she continued. "Dr. Putfark insisted that I didn't need to call you to confirm our interview."

"Believe me, I know just how insistent your Dr. Putfark can be." His voice was huskily resonant and deep.

"Well, I'm sorry I'm so late. I had a flat tire. And your map was a bit...inadequate." She looked around in awe at the room she was entering. Wood, glass, stone and views of some of the prettiest coun-

tryside ever merged to create a harmonious picture.

"Not my map. T.J.'s, my son. He drew the original last year for a fifth grade geography class project." There was a hint of pride in his voice.

Lesley felt a surge of relief. This man was married. This man was married? How could her sources, old though they were, have failed to mention a wife and child?

Travis Hagen watched the progression of expressions flicker across her face. "You're not safe, you know. T.J.'s mother and I are divorced. I live alone."

"Mr. Hagen, I'm here to collect some information about you for the research project that we're doing. I'd like to get started as soon as possible so that I won't take up too much of your valuable time." Fighting to keep her voice level and under control, she concentrated on not letting this outrageously attractive man unnerve her.

He held his plate up in front of him, wiggling it from side to side. "You caught me eating lunch. All you can do now is agree to have a sandwich with me. I've never been able to talk sense on an empty stomach. I make a mean bologna sandwich. With or without mustard?" His slow grin was infectious.

"I never eat bologna. Only salad for lunch. It's healthier." Her voice, even to her own ears, sounded self-righteous.

"I'll tell you what. I'll fix you a bologna sandwich with lettuce and tomato on it and you can take the bologna off and throw it in the garbage." He turned and headed out of

the room, giving Lesley no choice except to follow him.

The kitchen was a gourmet's delight with every possible modern appliance. She found a stool and sat uneasily on it while she watched the large man stoop to retrieve something from the refrigerator.

He slapped two pieces of white bread together with mustard and bologna. "I lied about the lettuce and tomato. Coke or root beer? You look like the root-beer type."

"I guess I'm supposed to ask what the root-beer type is, Mr. Hagen."

"Someone who has to convince herself that there is something redeeming in every small lapse of virtue. And call me Travis, please."

"I'll have a Coke, Travis." She smiled at him, wondering if perhaps she had completely blown out of proportion the information that she had read on this man. The warm gaze and the playful innuendos were probably the natural by-products of being such a gorgeous member of the species: homo sapiens hunkus incredibilus. "I thought that everyone who did comic strips lived in New York City. I was really surprised to find out from your syndicate that you lived so close to Christiansburg." She took the Coke he offered.

"When it came time for me to take over the strip from my father, I was able to settle almost anywhere I wanted. I always thought it was a bit strange to have a comic strip about a rural farming family written in the biggest city in America."

"Well, it was a real gift to the project to have you so close by. Gerald would have had to run up quite a

phone bill interviewing you in New York."

"Gerald?"

"Dr. Putfark," she amended.

"Don't you usually do the interviewing for him?"

"Actually, no," she said, shaking her head. "He said I'd be perfect for the job." They finished their sandwiches in silence.

"How did you get a job reading comic strips?" He turned, his face too close for her to feel comfortable.

She sat back, distancing herself slightly. "That's not all there is to this. We're examining various media that make reference to family life. We analyze them to see what they are saying about the way American families live."

Travis smiled slightly at her serious face. "This Futspack character said that 'The Family Jones' was only one of about two dozen strips that you're going to study." He moved slightly closer, offsetting the distance that she had put between them. "You know, Lesley, I was surprised to find out just how... important... this kind of research could be. I gathered from Dr. Bisfork that he would do almost anything to get his information. Almost anything."

Lesley felt a cold shiver go up her spine. "When you put a lot of yourself into something, you want to be sure it turns out well."

Travis smiled, his eyes closing slightly. "Mmm...and have you put a lot of yourself into it, Lesley?"

"I work very hard, Mr. Hagen."

"Travis."

"Strange," Lesley murmured. "A few minutes ago calling you Travis seemed like a good idea."

Travis rose and leisurely began to clear off the counter. "Dr. Futzpark seemed to want this interview very badly," he said. "Do you know how badly he wanted it?"

Lesley's stomach dropped to her toes. There were enough innuendos here to keep her busy for a decade. "I'm sorry if he was too pushy. His dedication can get a bit overwhelming at times."

His sexy, lopsided smile had disappeared to be replaced by what Lesley tried not to identify as a leer. "Tell me, are you anywhere near as dedicated as Tuffkarp is?"

She sat up straighter, her spine stiffening. "I take this research very seriously. I hope that's what you're asking."

"Sometimes people are so dedicated that they'll do all sorts of things to meet their goals." He stopped in front of her and lightly rested his hand on her shoulder. The subtle pressure seemed to burn. "Has anyone ever told you that you have beautiful skin?" he asked, as a fingertip came up to caress her cheek with a whisper-soft touch.

"Not in the last twenty-six years," she choked.

"You must have other attributes that distracted them."

"I have a tremendously high IQ and I won fourth place in the broad jump my second year at Clifton Junior High," Lesley babbled. "I've been knocking people dead for years with those attributes." She stood, pushing the stool with her legs to begin backing away from Travis.

"Somehow I think we're on different wavelengths," he said. Travis began to stalk her with the agile control of a cat stalking a wounded bird. Lesley imagined that he was mentally licking his lips.

"Mr. Hagen." She felt an urge to turn and run. "I am here to interview you, not for any other reason."

He looked at her appraisingly, his blue eyes heavy-lidded and mysterious. "Oh, is that what Dr. Fuzzcork told you? I could almost believe that you think that's true."

"Putfark, the man's name is Putfark!" She put her hands in front of her, palms out as if to ward off an attacker. "I am not here to play silly games with you." She picked up her handbag and backed out of the kitchen.

In her confusion she found herself turning the wrong way in the hall. In front of her was a huge bedroom, complete with a king-size water bed. Footsteps behind her blocked off her intended escape.

"I definitely got up on the wrong side of the bed today," she groaned.

"Perhaps you need to try again." Travis put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. With disconcerted fascination she watched as he bent, placing his lips firmly against hers.

"Take your hands off me!" Lesley's voice trembled with hurt pride.

Travis watched the expressions crossing Lesley's face. He removed the tinted glasses she was wearing. Without them her big golden-brown eyes were clearly visible and he saw the hurt there. She wrenched free,

not taking time to notice the subtle change in his features.

"You've had your fun," she said as calmly as she could. "I'm leaving now."

"Wait," he said, his voice serious. She looked as if she was on the verge of tears. "Damn Putfark!" he swore. "Lesley, I had no idea..."

"Spare me your explanations." She brushed past him, not caring about anything except finding the front door. She let herself out with a bang.

WHAT KIND of man would play such spiteful games with her, she wondered as she stood under the pounding beat of the shower water. Actually, what kind of *men*? Gerald had sent her there and Travis had humiliated her.

The persistent ringing of a telephone interrupted her thoughts. She turned off the shower and grabbed a fluffy bath towel. Still the phone continued to echo through the rooms of the apartment. With a sigh she hastily pulled on a pair of faded blue jeans and a thin white T-shirt. She opened the door and raced for the phone.

Her mother's voice sounded far away. "We haven't heard from you for a while, so we thought we'd call to see what's going on."

"How are Jennifer, David and the kids?" Lesley asked. She listened as her mother talked nonstop about the antics of her sister Jennifer's children.

The sudden squawk of the doorbell snapped Lesley's mind out of

automatic pilot. She covered the receiver. "Who's there?" she called.

"The U.P.S. man."

"Come in." Lesley concentrated on trying to break into her mother's monologue long enough to excuse herself. When no possibility presented itself she looked up to see Travis Hagen standing in her living room.

"Get out!" she mouthed silently, pointing to the door until she realized that the motion pulled her damp shirt even tighter across her breasts.

He shook his head with irritating laziness. "No," he mouthed. The exaggerated pantomime looked like a kiss.

After another anecdote, Mrs. Belmont gave her daughter a few last words of motherly advice and the conversation ended. Lesley turned to face Travis with her arms crossed in front of her.

"I want you out of here right now, Travis Hagen!"

"I want to talk to you, Lesley. And I came to return these." He stepped closer and handed her the glasses she'd left at his house. "They hide the prettiest golden-brown eyes I've ever seen."

As his eyes dropped to the visible outline of her breasts, she fled into her bedroom, grabbing and pulling on a bulky white pullover. She waited a moment to compose herself before reentering the living room.

Travis was wandering around the small room, looking at the decorations on the wall. Watching Travis Hagen examine her personal things was a little like letting him into her soul. She didn't like it.

"Mr. Hagen, I'd like to get this over with."

Travis looked at his watch. "It is dinnertime. Can I take you out to eat?" He watched as Lesley shook her head firmly. "I can't talk on an empty stomach." Travis smiled disarmingly.

She let out a groan of frustration. "All right. I'll make you a salad if it will get you out of here quicker." She turned and entered the kitchen, aware that he was following.

"I usually only eat meat for dinner, never salad." He chuckled softly. "I'll bet you never let a piece of bologna into this kitchen."

Lesley opened the refrigerator to take out the salad ingredients. "I have this theory. There are two kinds of people. Those who eat bologna and those who don't. You might say that the first kind are..."

"Full of bologna?"

"Exactly."

"I'm sure I deserved that." His voice was sincere, and Lesley looked at him in surprise. "I'm not good at apologies, so this will probably take some doing to get it right." He flashed a quick smile.

"God save me from conceited men." Lesley turned her attention to the salad, waiting for him to go on.

"This Professor Mudpack fellow called me about a month ago and wanted to arrange an interview. He was arrogant and demanding. I told him that I'd be happy to help when my schedule permitted, but that for the next month I was probably going to be too busy developing a new story line for the strip. He kept calling anyway, getting more and more pushy. He even tried offering me in-

centives." Travis ran his hands through the hair on his forehead.

"What kind of incentives?" Lesley's mind was whirling, anticipating what she was about to hear.

"Well, at first he just mentioned things like added prestige, publicity about 'The Family Jones' when the research was published. That kind of thing. I guess it got to be a game of cat and mouse. I found Dudmark to be so self-righteous and obnoxious that I let my better judgment lapse."

Lesley felt a flash of the hurt that she had experienced earlier in the day. "Go on."

"My schedule finally cleared up a bit." Travis turned his head slowly, no longer looking at her. "Bismark called with a new suggestion."

"Putfark."

"Yes, Putfark. He suggested that if I didn't want him to do the interview, maybe I'd let someone else do it. I told him only if she was five-foot-five, remarkably good-looking and a wonder in bed."

There was a pregnant silence. Lesley stoically waited for the rest of the story.

"I thought that would be the end of it. My intention was to let him know in no uncertain terms that I didn't want anything to do with his research. The next day, Butquirk called back and said that he was going to take me up on my condition."

"And then I showed up." Lesley's voice caught slightly.

"I thought you were part of the game. I assumed that you were playing along with the joke."

"Well, I guess you got the shock of your life. I know I did." Lesley began to toss the salad. "Tell me, do

you make a habit of letting strange men set you up with women as bribes?"

She brushed past him, carrying the bowl into the dining area and setting it down on the lovely antique oak dining table. Travis followed her at a safe distance.

Halfway through the salad, Travis set down his fork. "I never intended to hurt you. I thought you were playing along." His voice sounded strangely like a caress. "I didn't think you'd find it so upsetting. I didn't realize until I saw your eyes that I'd hurt you. I'm not sure I understand why you were so upset, but I'm truly sorry for being so insensitive."

Lesley stopped and stared at Travis. She realized that he was telling her the truth.

"You're supposed to tell me that you understand and that I'm forgiven," he prompted her.

She nodded, still staring.

The corners of his mouth turned up lazily. "Then I'm off the hook. You know, I'd really be glad to help with your research. Sort of a concrete apology. If you still want to interview me I'll be available to you, but never to Putfutz."

Lesley smiled inwardly at the new addition to the series of purposely inaccurate names. "I'd like to do it soon. Afterward I'm going to have to spend several weeks at the university and public libraries going through microfilm so I can complete the content analysis on your strip."

Travis stretched and stood. "Use the files at my house. I have copies of

every episode of 'The Family Jones.' Three generations of them."

Lesley stood and followed Travis toward the door. "Can I take the chance?"

"If it's to be hands off, then it will be hands off. And I won't tease you either." He gave her a lingering perusal before he opened the door. "But I'll have to admit my hunting instincts have been aroused. I've never met anyone so delightfully shy and perplexed by male attention."

Lesley blushed. "That's the first time anyone has ever seen my shyness as an asset. Can I interview you tomorrow?"

"Lunch? Bring lettuce and tomato, I'll supply the..."

"Bologna," they finished together.

She experienced a feeling of regret at his going. She had to concede that he had brought a warmth and vitality with him.

So Travis Hagen's attentions had not been a malicious attempt to humiliate her. Certainly she had outgrown some of her adolescent lack of self-esteem, but today was proof that there was still a lot of it present.

Having a beautiful sister had been a difficult way to grow up. Lesley had been tall and awkward and Jennifer had been short and bouncy. Jennifer had perfect teeth; Lesley had worn braces. Jennifer had been a cheerleader, and Lesley had quietly gotten straight A's. Why did I see that as a shortcoming, she wondered.

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"HAS THE KING of comic strip interpretation made it in yet, Sylvia?" Lesley leaned against the desk of the reception area of the Christiansburg College building that housed the Department of Mass Communications. Sylvia's smile was expectant. The softly rounded, middle-aged secretary was Lesley's friend. "I'm gearing myself up to confront him."

Sylvia's only answer was to begin humming "Onward Christian Soldiers."

"Come in, come in." The cross voice from the inner sanctum responded to Lesley's knock. Straightening her spine, she opened the door. Gerald made no move to stand or even sit up when he saw her. "I asked Sylvia not to let anyone disturb me."

"As you can see, I'm here anyway." It was not a typical Lesley Belmont approach and Gerald's jaw dropped several inches. "Gerald," Lesley said evenly, "yesterday I was humiliated and treated like a call girl, and I understand that you were at least partially at fault."

"Call girl?" Lesley noticed the beginnings of a sickly smile. "The man is insufferable. I only wish we didn't have to deal with his kind in this research."

"Yes, it is amazing the kinds of people that one has to deal with in this research," she said sweetly as she met his eyes without flinching.

Gerald leaned back in his chair. "Don't get too uppity or you'll find yourself out of a job."

Lesley thought about all the hours she had put in on the research, all

the data she single-handedly had collected, all the ideas that she had incorporated into the study. Instinctively she knew that her job was perfectly safe. "I could quit, Gerald. I will quit if you ever do anything like this again." Despite her quivering knees, she walked to the door.

"What in the blazes has come over you?" he shouted after her.

"A major attack of self-esteem," she said with spirit before her spurt of courage crashed around her.

Lesley left the office, waving goodbye to Sylvia. "I'll be at Travis Hagen's house this afternoon." The smile Sylvia gave her held surprise and respect.

Lesley gave herself an hour to make the trip from the university to Travis's house. At the turn in the road where she had stopped to fix her flat tire, she passed the old blue pickup driven by the farmer who had helped her the day before. She waved, not seeing the way his eyes followed her as she sped by.

Lesley honked when she reached the end of Travis's driveway. He was waiting for her at the front door.

He ushered her in, his hand resting lightly on her back. Today she was letting herself enjoy his touch.

"I was half afraid that in the light of day you'd think that coming up here wasn't a good idea. Did you talk to Fatpork today?"

She made a face at the name. "Yes, Dr. Putfark and I had a brief conversation. I would say that the situation has been straightened out." She kept her voice noncommittal.

Travis put his hand lightly under her chin and turned her face toward

his. "You'll let me know if he gives you any more trouble, I hope."

"I think I can handle this by myself, but I wish I'd never gotten involved with him." Too late, she realized how her remark had sounded.

Travis uttered a muffled curse. "That man could never understand a woman like you." He shook his head fiercely. "If you were my woman, I would think twice before letting you near another man, much less sending you to one with my blessing. Gerald Putfark is a fool."

Lesley's mouth dropped open. "I have not appointed you as my protector or keeper, Mr. Hagen. How dare you get so... so... personal!"

"I have a feeling 'getting personal' is the ultimate sin in your opinion." Travis thrust his hands in his pockets. "You're so baffled by male interest that you can't trust it even when you recognize it."

The fact that he had so quickly come to understand the problem that had haunted her since adolescence was intimidating. She shut her eyes against the blue ones that were examining her.

"Don't run," Travis said quietly. "Come on, I'll take you out to my studio."

Lesley followed Travis, while his words still rang in her ears. They went down the steps of the deck heading toward one of the barn-board buildings.

"My studio." Travis opened the door and motioned her in.

"And here's where you live your life," Lesley murmured. The studio contrasted sharply with the emptiness of the house. Every available

inch of wall space was covered with drawings, knickknacks, photographs. There were magazines piled neatly on tables, books crammed solidly into bookshelves.

Travis pointed to a small open room built across the heavy beams above them. Lesley admired the view of muscular thighs and firm buttocks as he climbed the decidedly rickety ladder and disappeared. She ventured up the ladder. She had expected an attic. Instead there was a comfortable bedroom-sitting room combination. Lesley imagined what it would be like to lie on the bed and watch the stars on a clear night.

They climbed back down and she arranged herself on the sofa with a stenographer's pad and pen. She raised her tawny eyes to his and smiled shyly. "I'm very glad you brought me here."

Travis settled on the sofa next to her in comfortable intimacy and she began asking him questions.

After a half hour of dry interviewing, she sighed and stretched. "My sentiments exactly," he said with a smile. "I was all set to tell you about my entire life."

She set down the pad and curled her legs under her on the sofa, shifting to face him. "Tell me."

"Only child. Hell-raiser. Poor student. Would-be artist. Terrific cartoonist. Fun-loving. Divorced father-of-one."

"Travis, come on. Details."

He lounged back on the sofa, hands clasped supporting his head. "I got kicked out of private school in eighth grade and my parents reluctantly sent me to the local public school. I loved it." Travis looked at

her with his lids at half-mast not quite covering a lecherous sparkle. "I discovered girls there. It was quite a discovery."

"I'll bet."

He grew serious. "I met my best friend there too. Joshua. We went to college together. I majored in art; Joshua majored in having fun." His eyes focused on something beyond the walls of the studio. "My grandfather died when I was in high school. In college my father had a serious stroke. I went home in my senior year to take over the cartoon strip. I was going to go back to the university to see Joshua graduate. He was killed in a car accident one month before graduation."

The room was silent. Lesley put her hand on his shoulder in comfort.

He smiled slightly. "I went back for his funeral. My ex-wife had been a good friend of Joshua's, too. You might say his death brought us together. We got married and went back to New York to live. T.J. was born and we lived together for three years."

"So many losses in such a short time." Lesley's voice was soothing.

"Vivian and I couldn't make it together. We parted as good friends and we have joint custody of T.J. Vivian has a business in Roanoke now, and I have my studio here. The end of my life history."

Lesley realized that her hand was still on Travis's shoulder. He finally turned slightly to face her. "I really don't usually burden people with my life story. Thank you for listening."

The words infused her with warmth. "I liked hearing about you,

Travis." She looked at her watch. "I think I've taken up enough of your time for today."

He nodded. "I meant what I said about using my files."

They stood for a moment in quiet intimacy. Finally she gathered her notes and headed for the door.

As she left, she raised her hand in salute. She had learned more about Travis Hagen today than any interview could possibly reveal. And she definitely liked what she had discovered.

TWO WEEKS had passed since Lesley's first encounter with Travis Hagen. During that time she had seen him often. His complete cooperation with her research had enabled her to spend countless hours in his studio, reading and analyzing long series of his comic strip. And as she gave her heart to the imaginary family of Grandpa Silas Jones, Lesley realized that she was fast giving her heart to its creator, Travis Hagen.

The doorbell interrupted her thoughts. "Who's there?" she asked idly as she opened the door.

"It's the U.P.S. man." Travis stood sedately in the hallway. "I'm here to deliver a proposition to a certain young lady."

Lesley shook her head. "No, absolutely not. I will not read another comic strip. Saturday is my day off."

Travis brushed Lesley's cheek with his fingers. "I can see that you need lessons on submitting to the greater will. Your proper instruction will begin by going with me to see T.J.'s first Little League game of the season. I brought you a gold T-shirt.

T.J.'s team has gold uniforms." He took her arm before she could protest his remark. "Come on, we have to pick up T.J."

The trip to Roanoke took almost an hour. Lesley relaxed against the leather upholstery of Travis's Wagoner. At the first Roanoke exit, they pulled off the interstate, driving through suburban developments. Travis turned in at a modest apartment complex, parking next to a giant swimming pool. "Come on in with me, Lesley. I want you to meet Vivian."

Lesley hesitated slightly, but Travis got out and came around to Lesley's side, pulling open her door and taking her hand. Once outside the car he didn't let go of it.

Travis's knock was answered by a wiggling, laughing torpedo of red-haired little boy. "Hey, Mom, Dad's here." T.J. grabbed Travis and pulled him into the apartment. Lesley followed shyly, her discomfort increasing as she glimpsed the lovely woman kissing Travis's cheek.

"Lesley, I'm so glad to meet you," Vivian said warmly.

Lesley smiled uncertainly.

"You look great in that color gold. Travis, on the other hand, shouldn't be caught dead in that color. He's a Summer and he's not supposed to wear gold."

Lesley watched in fascination as Vivian and Travis then carried on a friendly conversation about T.J. and his plans for the coming week. Their relationship seemed to be too good to be true. Anyone watching them would think that there had never been a moment's tension between them. And yet they were divorced.

Here was one of the most attractive men ever, and Vivian had let him slip through her fingers somehow. Why, Lesley wondered.

"Let's go, Lesley. It's time to get T.J. there for pre-game warmup." They were out the door and down the stairs, Lesley still trying to piece together the curious meeting.

T.J. wiggled and chattered all the way to the ballfield. Like his mother he was genuinely nonchalant with Lesley, seeming to accept her as a friend of his father's.

Waving goodbye to T.J., who had jumped from the car and sprinted to the ballfield as they parked, Lesley and Travis settled down to wait for the game. Travis draped his arm casually around Lesley's back. The May sunshine beamed down on them.

The game began. When T.J. pitched a no-hitter in the third inning, Lesley stood and cheered.

The game was tied in the final inning. T.J. was on deck, and Travis grasped Lesley's hand, gripping it tightly. Neither of them took their eyes off the field.

The first pitch went past T.J. and the umpire called a strike. Two balls were followed by another strike. "God, I hate this part of it." Travis shuddered next to her.

The pitcher wound up; T.J. swung the bat and connected. Dropping the bat, he ran the bases, landing on second easily. Two more hits by his teammates and T.J. slid into home plate, scoring the winning run. Travis kissed Lesley with all the pent-up energy he had reserved for the celebration.

Then Lesley watched Travis run down the steps to congratulate T.J. and his team.

Hours later, Lesley stood with Travis in front of her apartment door. "It's been a lovely day."

"Invite me in." Travis was regarding her with an intensity that she had not often seen in his eyes. He lifted her chin. She blinked, wishing suddenly that she was wearing her big dark glasses.

"Travis, don't toy with me."

"You can't believe I'm really interested in you, can you?" He looked genuinely perplexed. Travis trailed his strong fingers down her cheek and over her lips. He raised her head the infinitesimal distance he needed to look in her eyes. "There's so much hesitation there, I can almost touch it. I don't understand you at all, Lesley, but if you want me to leave you alone, I will. You've got to tell me what you want though."

Lesley stared into the depths of his eyes. "Travis, I want to be your friend," she said haltingly.

"And?"

Her heart skipped a beat. She was sure that if Travis suspected the intensity of her feelings, the knowledge would be the kiss of death to their relationship. "And... I don't know... can't say. Let's not rush anything..." She was breathless, and the words came out with a strangled sound.

A glimmer of humor shone in his eyes. "Well, you didn't say much, but I'd say you were very expressive." His mouth came down to claim hers.

"Is this rushing you?" Travis asked, lifting his mouth from hers

for an instant. He ran his tongue along her bottom lip. "And this, is this rushing you?" he murmured into her cheek.

The strong fingers caressing her came around to cup the softness of her breast. He covered her mouth, ignoring her murmured protests. His hand found her other breast and caressed it, tantalizing the peak until it too was aching with need for him. Finally, pulling back slightly, he looked at her, the ever-present glint of humor mixed with a smoky desire.

She pulled back. "Don't make fun of me, Travis Hagen!"

"Never, Lesley." He raised her hand to his mouth, kissing her fingertips. "I intend to see you soon." She heard the door click behind her as the tears began to fall.

There had been a subtle ultimatum issued. They could continue their relationship and let it develop as it eventually would, or Lesley could call a complete halt to it now.

Lifting her chin slightly, she wondered if all the people who subscribed to the philosophy that "it was better to have loved and lost" still felt that way after they had lost everything. Lesley had a feeling she was about to put herself in the position of finding out.

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LESLEY WAS beginning to sort her research into piles on her office desk. Gerald had just added two more strips to the study. He wanted her to go to Roanoke and use the microfilm at the library there.

The ringing phone interrupted her. Lesley picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" She was surprised to hear Vivian identify herself.

"Lesley. I was calling to tell you that I enjoyed meeting you the other day, and I was wondering if there was any chance that we could get together for lunch sometime this week? I can drive down there or we can meet halfway if you'd like." Her voice was lovely and warm.

"I'd like that, Vivian. I'm going to have to be in Roanoke anyway, today. Could we have lunch then?"

They made a date for one o'clock.

The Hotel Roanoke sat on a knoll overlooking the medium-sized city. They found a table next to one of the luxuriously draped windows.

"Do you know why I'm sitting on this side of the table?" Vivian asked.

Lesley shook her head.

"So that I don't have to look at that cart of pastries over there. If I stare at them I'll gain an automatic ten pounds."

Lesley found herself relaxing.

"Really, you're so lucky. I grew up as a hopelessly fat, redheaded kid who was dressed eternally in shocking pink because my mother heard somewhere that pink was flattering with red hair. She decided to prove it to the world."

"Your mother and mine would have been friends. I still hate pink," Lesley said, grimacing.

Vivian examined Lesley carefully in the light from the window. "That's smart. I think you're an Autumn, and Autumns should not wear pink, not ever."

In spite of herself, Lesley was fascinated by Vivian's knowledge and she asked tentatively, "What else does an Autumn avoid?"

Vivian hesitated and then said truthfully, "Navy blue."

Lesley sighed. "There goes half my wardrobe."

"And gray...and black...and anything with blue undertones."

"There goes the other half of my wardrobe."

The time passed surprisingly quickly. Suddenly, as they were finishing dessert, Lesley looked at her watch in horror. "It's really getting late. I've kept you much too long."

"Not at all. In fact, I was wondering if you'd like to come to my salon. I'll do a color consultation for you."

Vivian refused to accept no for an answer. "Come on, you'll enjoy it. It's fun to see how good colors can make you look. And if I can get away with this outrageous violet dress, just think what you'll be able to wear."

"WHY DIDN'T I know all along that these colors weren't any good for me?" Lesley asked a couple of hours later. "It seems pretty obvious now."

Vivian was getting more color swatches. "I think people buy whatever they're used to seeing on other people. And occasionally we really fall in love with a color that isn't right for us. Travis loves lime green. I've had to grit my teeth a few times to keep from rescinding his visiting rights on the days Travis wears a favorite green shirt of his."

Lesley was surprised by the cheerful casual mention of Travis. She found that she couldn't help herself. "You and Travis are good friends, aren't you?"

Vivian was holding up swatches in the Spring group, showing Lesley how their light tones were too pale for her more earthy coloring. "Yes. That's part of the reason I called you today." Vivian draped a lovely rust color around Lesley's neck. "He's very interested in you. He's never brought anyone to meet me or to meet T.J. in all the years we've been divorced."

Lesley was astounded.

Vivian smiled warmly at her. "I want Travis to be happy. And I think that you make him happy."

There was a heavy silence. Finally Lesley said, "I don't know what to say."

Vivian reached over and squeezed her hand. "When the time comes, tell Travis that I have given him permission to explain our marriage to you. It might clear up a few things." Vivian pulled out a small swatch of colors and presented them to Lesley. "These are for when you go shopping next." Spontaneously she reached over and gave Lesley a hug.

Lesley was touched by the embrace. She left feeling as if she had made a new friend.

SHE OPENED the door to the stairs leading up to her apartment to find Travis sprawled comfortably on the steps. As she unlocked her door, he followed her inside. Travis draped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her over to the couch, sitting comfortably close to her. "I came to say goodbye for a few weeks. I'm going to New York to meet with my syndicate. If I weren't going to be so busy while I'm there, I'd ask you to come along."

She was delighted that he had thought of taking her with him. "I'm a working girl, remember? Gerald wouldn't be pleased if I took off for a few weeks anyway."

"Yes, I mentioned it to him today, just to see if I could get his goat." There was a decidedly smug expression on Travis's face, and Lesley sat up straight to look at him. "I stopped by to see you at work and I got to meet Gerald R. Putfark in person."

"Did you get his name straight?"

"Not one time." Travis pulled her nearer and bent to kiss her, his mouth hovering tantalizingly close to hers. "After I saw Gerald today, I realized that you weren't involved with him." Travis's mouth was close to her ear, the words soft and knowing. "You have too much respect for yourself to let that Putfark character get close to you."

For a moment she let the total extent of her vulnerability pool in her golden-brown eyes for Travis to see. "It's not just Gerald. I never let anyone get close to me," she whispered. "I guess I don't trust myself to make a decent decision unless I can isolate a hypothesis, research the subject thoroughly and form a rational conclusion."

"Sometimes you just have to do what your feelings tell you to." He began to caress her cheeks.

"I don't want to be hurt." Shutting her eyes, she said, "Travis, please don't hurt me."

She sensed his face close to hers. "I'll try my hardest not to."

Lesley opened her eyes. "I'll try, too," she whispered as he covered her lips with his. His kiss was ago-

nizingly thorough, promising the world. Lesley responded with a fervor that left no doubt about her feelings. At the end of the kiss they clung to each other. "I'll miss you," she ventured finally.

"Good. When I get back we'll celebrate."

Lesley watched as he took the stairs two at a time. The next two weeks stretched in front of her like a yawning chasm.

For some reason she had an unaccountable yearning for a bologna sandwich.

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LESLEY WENT in the bedroom and flopped face down on the bed. She could not remember ever having been this bored. She had kept herself busy for the past two weeks, so busy in fact that she had only had to think about Travis during the long nights.

Perhaps Travis would come back totally uninterested in picking up their relationship. But then, she had to admit, there had been several long, intimate phone calls. She no longer wanted to chat long-distance. She wanted him there in the flesh and she wanted him, period.

The phone rang shrilly. "I'm back," said the deep male voice on the other end, and Lesley knew that her boredom was over.

Several hours later, a new rust silk dress with a low draped neckline slithered over her body. Her bank-book was going to be lighter, but she felt like a success. The silk dress moved across her, clinging to her and accenting her waist. The neckline plunged frankly between her breasts.

The effect was daring, she thought, not at all like the Peter Pan collars she usually wore. "Good," she said out loud. "It's about time!"

The doorbell was bleating merrily through the apartment.

Travis leaned against the door-frame. His smile was lazy as he bent over to kiss her. "You're beautiful. I've missed you."

Lesley abandoned herself to his warm strong arms and melting kisses. "I've missed you, too, Travis," she murmured against his suede dinner jacket.

"Let's go," he muttered uncere-
moniously. "Your apartment is en-
tirely too intimate. There's a little
lodge tucked away in the mountains
just north of Roanoke. How's that
sound?"

"Perfect," she answered.

THE LODGE was luxurious and com-
fortable by any standards. They were
sitting at a table overlooking the
valley below them. Travis took Les-
ley's hand and traced a pattern be-
tween the lines in her palm.

"Tell me about you. I keep ask-
ing, and you keep avoiding it."

She looked at him seriously for a
moment, and then the corners of her
mouth turned up slowly. "While you
were getting kicked out of school, I
was buried up to my nose in the li-
brary. I decided somewhere along the
way that being a scholar was going to
be my salvation."

"From what?"

Lesley fidgeted in her seat a mo-
ment. "From real life, I guess. I
think I've always been afraid to be
anything, to do anything that wasn't
related directly to my brains. Lately

I've begun to wonder about that." She tilted her head to see Travis watching her intently.

"When you figure it out, I hope I'll be the first to know." His eyes were inscrutable.

They finished the meal with coffee and rich apple pie made from Virginia apples stored over the winter. The air was delightfully cool outside when Travis took her hand and led her to an open area behind the lodge. The air smelled of springtime.

"I understand that you spent an afternoon with Vivian a few weeks ago. I've been wondering if you were going to ask me to clarify anything that came up that day. I finally figured out that you would never bring it up yourself." Travis looked down at her. The air seemed charged with suspense.

He paced restlessly back and forth. "I met Viv in college. I dated her a few times and I decided that she was a perfect match... for my friend Joshua." He shook his head slowly, shadows of pain flickering across his features.

"Vivian and Joshua were going to be married after graduation. I promised to be best man. I went back instead for Joshua's funeral." The sorrowful look on his face made Lesley reach out and hold him.

"The night he was killed, Vivian had told him that she was pregnant with their child. He went out to celebrate. I guess he had one too many and on the way home his car crashed and he was killed instantly."

The truth washed over Lesley like a mountain thunderstorm. "You

married Vivian to give the baby a name, didn't you?"

He nodded, looking straight at her for the first time. "We were both so completely torn up over Joshua. We clung together making plans for the baby, trying to create a marriage with nothing except our mutual love for Joshua and later of T.J. God knows, we tried to make a go of it. The simple truth was that we weren't in love."

Lesley brought Travis's hand to her face.

"I wanted you to know because I care about you," he said huskily as he pulled her close. "And I didn't want anything to stand between us."

Travis held her head against his chest. "After the divorce I acted like a real Don Juan. I was so disoriented from Joshua's death, T.J.'s birth and my failed marriage to Vivian. It's taken me years, literally, to get over the trauma of those events. I'm still not sure I'm ready to make another commitment." His voice was low and his breath was warm against her forehead.

Travis took Lesley's hand and they walked a little farther down the path. He gently kissed her nose, her eyelids, the soft skin of her neck. "I guess I've sufficiently warned you off. How come we're still here?"

She wriggled in pleasure at the feel of his tongue moving up to possess her ear. "Are you already planning to dump me, Travis? You sure aren't acting like a man who's planning the end of a relationship."

Travis's arm tightened around her. "Actually, Lesley, I seem to be trying to avoid asking you if you'll

pend the night with me at the lodge tonight."

"Here, Travis?" She was playing for time and she knew it. She wanted him in the worst way. But she was sure it was going to spell the end of her relationship with him. Not because he said he wasn't ready for commitments, but because she was sure he would discover that she was terribly inadequate. "Travis." Her voice was anguished.

"I've really handled this badly, haven't I?" Travis moved away from her slightly. "You would be crazy to say yes. Here I've told you my bleeding-heart story, then I've told you about my crazy behavior after the divorce. Follow it with a declaration of my reluctance for commitments and end it with a proposition. You'd have to be a masochist to say yes."

"Yes." The word was out of her mouth before she could think about it. "Yes," she said again to be certain she had heard herself right. Like an atomic explosion the truth descended upon her. She was in love with him!

He seemed extravagantly happy. Lesley was suddenly terrified.

SHE COULD FEEL the seeds of regret sprouting to flourish inside her. Travis was a magnificent lover. He was exquisitely gentle, concerned and reassuring, and his hands held terrifying magic. Soon he would coax from her the response he desired, and she would forget her worries to come alive in his arms.

For almost any woman that would be enough. But for Lesley Belmont, who even took the comic strips seri-

ously, there had to be more. She was a one-man woman. If her relationship with Travis ended abruptly, she would never find the courage to try again.

She had committed herself to this night. She would not hurt him. Let him think her hesitation was due entirely to shyness.

Carefully he urged her back against the pillows. In the darkness she could only dimly make out his body poised over hers. Lesley was torn with the desire to forget her fears and give herself wholeheartedly to the man she loved. Surely this couldn't be wrong. Surely she was strong enough to survive if it turned out to be a short-term romance.

Travis, propped on one elbow, was leaning over her, kissing her nose, her forehead. Teasingly he played with her breasts, stroking them with the whisper-soft movements of his hands. The sensation was like a sharp pain inside her, a longing for love that she knew would not be satisfied no matter how perfect the night was in other ways.... She stiffened sharply and Travis jerked his hand away from her as if he had been burned.

"Lesley, what is it?"

In answer she moved closer to him, determined to try, determined to make an attempt to satisfy him at least. "I'm sorry, Travis, I'm just a little anxious. I want you, Travis Hagen," she said, her mouth seeking his. "I want you."

When the realization that Travis was not kissing her penetrated her dimmed senses, she opened her eyes to find him a distance away, watch-

ing her thoughtfully. "I know you do."

Puzzled, she watched as he moved still farther away to lie on his side, not touching her at all. "What have I done wrong?" she asked, unconsciously gnawing on her lower lip. "Have you changed your mind about wanting me?"

Travis propped his head on his hand. "That would be impossible. I've just decided to stop being selfish." He sighed, wearily running a hand through his hair.

"I don't understand," Lesley flicked her heavy mane of hair over her shoulder, trying to hide her hurt expression in the dim light. Travis reached over and brushed the long hair away from her face.

"You're not ready for this. We both know it but I've been trying to ignore it all night. I wanted what you could give me so much that I was about to ignore what you need." His hand caressed her chestnut hair for a moment and then withdrew reluctantly. "You need more than I can give you tonight."

Lesley shut her eyes to keep from crying.

"Can you tell me honestly that you're ready to make love to me, that no matter what happens after tonight, you won't regret what we do in this room?" He tangled his fingers in her hair, pulling her head back so that she was forced to look at him. "I'm sorry I pushed you."

"I could have said no. I should have."

"But I know why you didn't."

Lesley tried to turn her head from his, but his fingers were still locked in her hair. "Please, Travis..."

"You're in love with me, aren't you?"

She shut her eyes again briefly. "After tonight, how will you bear to spend time with me, Travis?"

"I'm not going to tell you I love you; I don't know exactly what I feel. But I do know I want to spend time with you. I want whatever's between us to continue to grow, Lesley. Tonight's made me see that."

She was too weary to argue. "I don't want to talk anymore," she said. "I just want to get some sleep."

"There's only one thing."

Lesley lifted her eyes to meet his.

"Just don't do anything seductive in the next eight hours. Don't stretch or sigh or snore. Don't breathe. My control is stretched about as far as it can go."

Somehow, the teasing words were just what she needed to hear. Travis still wanted her and he was letting her know it.

Her eyes began to shut and she could feel the beginnings of peace radiating through her exhausted body. The picture of herself as a woman unable to handle a man in her life was fading away. She was who she was. And Travis still wanted her in spite of the problems between them. In spite of the fact that he knew she loved him.

Travis understood that for her, making love was a commitment to love. He had told her that he still wanted her and that someday soon... She drifted off to sleep wondering if the facts indicated that Travis might, just might, have been saying that it was possible he was falling in love with her.

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IT WAS MONDAY, she was in love, and it felt good to be alive. There was a glow that seemed to come from deep inside that had nothing to do with makeup or color or style of clothing. It was love, plain and simple.

The lingering doubts she had about Travis's continued interest had disappeared. His signals were clear. There was a connection growing between them that had even survived the painfully abortive night at the lodge. Travis was making room for her in his life, and Lesley hoped that soon he would find there was also room in his heart.

Travis and Lesley made a simple supper of cheese and fruit and ate it on his kitchen deck, looking out over the mountains surrounding them.

"I'll bet you eat out here as often as you can," she murmured in contentment, snuggled in his arms after the food was all gone.

"You're right. The house seems too big, too empty. I'm either out here or in my studio most of the time," Travis said, stroking her hair. "When I asked the architect to design this place, I asked for a small compact space, big enough for a bachelor with a visiting son. When I looked at the design, I knew it was wrong. I realized that I didn't always want to live that way. I wanted a real home, and someday a family besides T.J. I wanted a wife and I wanted more children. And that's why this house is so big... and so empty. I think I've just been waiting for the right moment, the right help." He turned her face up to his.

"The other night I said I wasn't looking for a commitment. I guess I am."

"Travis, you don't have to... I didn't expect..." She let her head fall back to his chest, her eyes shutting briefly.

"I've already figured out that you expect nothing from me. I'm here to tell you to raise your expectations, my love." He gently kissed her eyelids, his lips traveling downward to claim hers.

Silently they both absorbed the new closeness that was developing so rapidly. Their relationship seemed to be careening toward a new destination, a mysterious place that neither of them had ever been to, and they weren't sure they would recognize if they got there. The only thing that Lesley was sure of was that if they continued in the direction they were heading, they would arrive together.

Lesley lounged in Travis's arms with a contentment she had never before felt.

Finally Travis broke the silence. "This probably sounds like a strange question, but do you read my comic strip?"

Lesley laughed softly. "I'm hooked on it. Completely. I'm anxiously waiting for the story to develop, just like half of America is."

"Not quite half, my love. But anyway, tomorrow, after breakfast, I'm going to take you to the studio and show you the whole next episode. Six-weeks' worth." Travis's hands lightly caressed her delicate skin. "I want you to see them with me so I can explain them to you. But now it's getting late. If you stay here any longer, I won't let you go."

"I'm not sure I want to."

He kissed her on the forehead and then pushed her gently away. "Until you are sure, it's better that you leave. Come back tomorrow morning when you're not bewitched by the moonlight."

At her car door, Travis convinced Lesley with one thorough kiss to make the trip back up the mountain the next morning. "I'll have to come early," she warned as she reluctantly turned away to get into the car.

"Wake me up. I'll leave the front door unlocked."

THE SUN had just peeked over the eastern mountain ridge when Lesley pulled into Travis's driveway. When she had told Travis that she would be early, she had not meant this ungodly hour, but after a long restless night, she had finally given up the pretense of sleep and had risen with the earliest birds.

The path to Travis's bedroom was firmly imprinted in her mind, and she followed it, peeking through the open door to find him sprawled across the water bed, sound asleep.

He looked so peaceful, such a glorious combination of dreaming little boy and heart-wrenching man, that she couldn't bear to wake him up.

She decided to hike up the gravel driveway to the mailbox for his morning paper. The early morning air was clear and cool. She tucked the paper carelessly under her arm. Lesley half expected to find Travis awake but when she heard no noise upon her return, she curled up in a lounge chair on the deck off the living room.

Her eyes sought "The Family Jones" with latent curiosity. Expecting to be entertained, Lesley stared at the black-and-white drawings a full minute before she recognized the caricature in the second frame. The character's name might be Lily, but the severe bun, the glasses and the outdated clothing made it perfectly apparent who Travis had had in mind when he'd drawn the strip. The paper drifted to the deck, a hapless sacrifice to Lesley's suspicions.

Consumed by humiliation, she stood grinding the comics with the heel of her shoe. Quickly she descended the stairs. She was almost running toward the little studio.

In a minute she knew that her worst fears were a reality. Tears streamed down her face as she poured over several weeks of the strip. Lily, obviously a caricature of Lesley, was shown as a homely spinster whom Bubba Jones kept running into in the course of his job behind the counter at the general store. Lesley groaned in tearful agony at the awkwardness, the painful shyness of the cartoon character. Bubba was a womanizer, a free spirit clothed in overalls but with the wit and determination of any city slicker. Lily seemed to have no purpose other than to be a target for laughter.

The pain was too much to bear. Travis had been laughing at her all the time.

Flinging the door open, Lesley started down the path. In the driveway, she fumbled with her keys.

She was almost out of the driveway before she noticed the old blue

pickup parked near the entrance to the road. The old man gave her a penetrating glance, shaking his head slowly. Ignoring him, she jammed down the gas pedal, making a wide sweep around his truck.

She covered the miles to Christiansburg quickly. Anger and a sense of betrayal burned like a fire inside her. Inside the little apartment Lesley pulled out her suitcases and randomly began to throw her clothes into them. There was nowhere to go except home to North Carolina. She felt a need for the comfort and reassurance that her family would provide.

And her hometown of Clifton had one other strength to recommend it. It did not carry "The Family Jones" in the local paper.

She went to the telephone. Sylvia's cheerful voice answered on the first ring. With a voice that sounded like it was coming from a casket, Lesley asked Sylvia to please stop in occasionally and water the plants in her apartment. Lesley could only give exhausted, noncommittal replies to Sylvia's startled questions. Finally, swearing Sylvia to total secrecy as to her whereabouts, she asked her to forward her work messages to her parents' home.

*

THE FIRST WEEK that she had been back in Clifton she had stayed in her room, sleeping and crying, convinced that she would die. But for the past few days she had been busy every day, doing errands and visiting old friends.

Lesley looked at her mother, who patted the seat of the chair next to

her on the porch as an invitation. Lesley sat down and sighed contentedly.

"You're doing better, aren't you, sweetie?" There was no idle curiosity in Mrs. Belmont's tone. Real concern hung in the air as poignant as the honeysuckle.

"Yes, I think I am. I even heard myself singing today." She turned slightly to meet her mother's eyes. "I still hurt terribly, but I don't feel like I'm dying anymore. Does that make sense?"

Mrs. Belmont reached to touch Lesley's cheek. "I think the last time you shared your feelings with me was when you were six years old." She wiped her eyes surreptitiously on the sleeve of her dress. "You've always been so self-sufficient I was never sure you needed anyone. Since you've been home this time, I've seen that isn't true."

Lesley shut her eyes, momentarily overwhelmed with pain and longing. "No, that certainly isn't true."

"Are you ready to tell me what happened?" Mrs. Belmont's voice was even, but Lesley sensed the deep longing to provide solace. Briefly she told her mother the story, leaving out no details.

"And that's why you won't take Travis Hagen's phone calls."

"That's right," Lesley answered tersely.

"He's been remarkably persistent for a young man who only has a guilty conscience he wants to clear up, sweetie."

Lesley flinched as she thought of the phone calls that she had refused to answer since her return to North Carolina. "He's stopped now.

Whatever was motivating him doesn't seem to be motivating him now."

She glanced at her mother and saw a guilty look steal across the otherwise wholesome features. "Mother, has Travis Hagen been bothering you?"

"No, he's not bothering me." Mrs. Belmont got up as if to head back into the house.

Lesley reached out and caught her mother's wrist. "What are you up to, Mother?"

Mrs. Belmont sighed. "After about the fourteenth phone call, Travis said he was coming down here to see you whether you wanted to see him or not."

"You're calling him Travis? What is going on here?"

"Travis said," Mrs. Belmont continued patiently, "that he was going to come down and get you and wring your pretty little neck. I think those were his exact words."

Lesley sputtered. "That arrogant..."

"I told him that you wanted to be left alone. That you were very hurt and needed some time to think. I convinced him to stop calling for a while and give you room to breathe."

Lesley watched her mother with a calculating look. "Why do I think you're not quite done talking yet?"

Mrs. Belmont looked embarrassed. "I've been calling him to let him know how you're doing." She cringed momentarily at the look on Lesley's face. "He's been very worried, sweetie. He seems like such a nice man."

"Nice?" Lesley stood up and stomped over to the porch railing.

"Nice? That's like calling a boa constrictor a cute little snake!"

Mrs. Belmont had reached the doorway. "You know, I haven't seen you lose your temper in twenty years. It's very becoming."

Lesley stared at the swinging screen door. Revelations were being slung at her today that made her head spin. The fact that her mother had viewed her as a self-sufficient, controlled person who was difficult to approach was hard to fathom. The fact that Travis Hagen, damn his hide, was still in her life whether she wanted him there or not was outrageous.

Lesley put her fingers to her temples, slowly massaging away the tension there.

"Hey, sis, how's it going?" She looked up to see Jennifer climbing the steps with her youngest son, Troy. He skipped off to find his grandparents, and Jennifer plopped down in the seat on the porch and began to fan herself briskly. Lesley got a sudden vision of what Jennifer would look like in twenty years. Mary Jane Belmont had sat in the seat only moments before, doing the same thing, with the same look on her face.

"What do you think, Lesley?" Jennifer's lilting voice was serious. "Are you finally noticing that I'm just a normal person and not some sort of mythical goddess?"

Lesley nodded. "I've spent most of my life thinking that if I were you, everything would be all right."

Jennifer laughed softly. "I think I know what you mean. You wanted to be little and cute and blonde. I know because I wanted to be tall and

have curly hair and be valedictorian of the class."

"You're kidding."

Jennifer put her hands in back of her head. "I'm not sure that anyone ever is satisfied with who they are when they're growing up." She reached over and patted Lesley on the hand.

"Are you happy with your life now?" Lesley asked wistfully, linking fingers with Jennifer.

"I'm satisfied." She gave Lesley's hand a squeeze. "And you? Happiness is eluding you right now, isn't it?"

Lesley nodded, a lump forming in her throat. "Yes, but I think I may be beginning to understand why. The difference between us was never that you were short and I was tall. Or that you were cheerleader material while I was a born valedictorian. The difference was that you weren't afraid to go after what you wanted. I was. And the one time I did go for it, I used very poor judgment."

"You're talking about a man, aren't you?"

Lesley nodded in silence.

"And now?"

Lesley sighed, returning Jennifer's squeeze as she withdrew her hand. "I think that I've changed, Jennifer. I'm going to try and never be frightened to be what I want to be, do what I want to do."

"Good for you." Jennifer slapped her sister lightly on the knee. "Does that mean you're going to go back to Virginia and straighten out whatever is wrong there?"

Lesley grimaced. "Not a chance."

Shaking her head, Jennifer got up to go in the house. "You've got a

ways to go then. But you're coming along. You're definitely coming along."

THE ENVELOPE was propped next to Lesley's glass of orange juice when she went downstairs to breakfast the next morning. "The Rainbow Connection" and Vivian's address were printed in gay violet script in the corner.

She blanched when she saw the enclosures. A neatly clipped series of comic strips lay in her lap. Enclosed with them was a letter. It was short and to the point.

Dear Lesley,

All I can hope is that you will view this act in the spirit that it is meant. I value your friendship.

Yours,
Vivian

Beginning with the first strip, she suffered through the same ten strips that she had read in Virginia before she had decided to leave for good. She relived the pain of those moments as once again she saw the awkward character of Lily, fumbling around, making mistakes, trying to avoid any contact with the suave country bachelor, Bubba Jones.

She reluctantly went on to the next strip, and the next. There was a subtle change occurring in both characters. Lily was being transformed from an awkward, shy spinster into a glowing, attractive woman. Bubba was being transformed from a womanizing, slick country dude to a car-

ing, concerned admirer of her beauty.

Lesley read the last strip with tears in her eyes, tears that she had thought were all used up. In the strip, Bubba held Lily and kissed her for the first time, and in the background, Grandpa Silas Jones looked on with an expression as radiant as the sun.

Paralyzed by her discovery, Lesley sat quietly in the big armchair. She had been wrong, terribly wrong. Travis's love for her shone through every frame of the little comic strip. She had been a fool. Her lack of self-esteem had completely colored her initial reading of the series. She had brought her misery on herself. Entirely on herself.

"What have I done?" she moaned out loud.

When she stood up, the comic strips tumbled off her lap. She was out of the living room and running up the stairs. Pulling her suitcases out of the closet, she threw her clothes into them.

Scrawling a quick goodbye to her parents, she placed the little note over the kitchen sink where her mother was sure to see it immediately.

*

SHE HAD ALMOST missed the plane, running through the terminal at the last minute to find the correct gate to board the flight, which was the only one to Roanoke, Virginia, that day. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were sparkling, and she felt that every nerve ending was on fire. When the flight attendant an-

nounced their imminent landing, she rattled in anticipation.

Lesley walked down the long metal steps into the bright, hot sunshine of a Blue Ridge summer day. Walking across the field, she drank in the sight of the surrounding mountains. This was her heart's home. No matter what happened with Travis today, she would not run away again. She was done with that part of her life.

Inside the modest terminal a prickling sensation at the back of her neck alerted her to the fact that someone was staring at her. Turning slightly she saw the tall figure of a man in faded blue jeans and a sapphire-blue cotton shirt.

Lesley sucked her breath in as Travis approached her. The words of apology that she had mentally rehearsed during the trip deserted her. She could only stare unblinkingly into the endless depths of his blue eyes. The heavy-lidded eyes were shuttered, closed off to her.

"How did you know I was coming, Travis?" Her voice was barely audible in the noisy room.

"Your mother called me," he said tersely. "You have a very bad habit of scaring people, Lesley."

"Travis," she said, "I'm so very sorry." She looked up to find him watching her, his blank expression still intact. "I suspected you of some pretty awful things. I was wrong."

"Is that all?" His look would qualify as a sneer on a less appealing face, she thought with a sinking heart.

He was right. At the very least she owed him an explanation. She took a deep, steadying breath. "That

morning, Travis, I went out to get your paper and bring it back to the house. I opened up the paper while you were sleeping and read your comic strip. I was shocked to discover that you had used me as a model for one of your characters."

"Lily," he replied succinctly.

"Yes. So I went back to the studio and read the first ten strips in that episode." She paused, trying to convey her feelings with her eyes. "I thought you were... you were mocking me, Travis. I thought you were making fun of me. It hurt so badly that I couldn't think straight." She could feel the pain even now. "I had to leave," she whispered.

"And now," he said quietly. "What do you think now?"

She lifted her chin slightly to gaze into his eyes. She could discern a faint flicker, a spark of warmth, and it gave her courage.

"I think that you love me." The words came out in a gasp, and a small solitary tear trickled down her cheek.

"And you, Lesley. How do you feel about me?" His voice was still even, controlled.

"Oh, Travis." The words were coming from deep inside her soul. "I love you so much."

He stood watching her, not smiling, not reaching out to touch her. "I want you to prove it. I want you to shout to the whole damned Roanoke airport that you love me."

Lesley looked at him, her eyes wide in shock, and for the first time, she recognized the hurt in his answering gaze.

"I won't marry a woman who constantly feels like I'm trying to

humiliate her. I won't marry a woman who goes through life worrying about what people are thinking of her." Travis's voice was even, but his eyes were serious.

Not believing that she was actually doing it, Lesley put one foot on the chair beside her and with a certain lack of grace, climbed onto the seat and stood in the middle of the airport terminal. People milling around nearby stopped and stared.

"Ladies and gentleman," she said in a choked voice that nevertheless carried to the edge of the little crowd. "I am in love with this man, Travis Hagen. And this is the last time I go along with any crazy ideas like this!"

The crowd applauded wildly as Travis lifted her off the chair, her body sliding down his until their mouths were locked together in a kiss that both felt in every cell of their bodies. Later, when the crowd had dispersed, they walked with arms tightly wrapped around each other to retrieve Lesley's luggage.

"Well, I hope that's the end of the long series of dumb things I've done since I met you, Travis." She felt his arm tighten around her.

"Well, there is one more thing. You're going to marry me, as soon as possible. But then, only an idiot would say that qualifies as dumb." Travis stopped momentarily to enjoy the blissful expression on her face. "You know, it took Bubba and Lily to show me the way. The day before you left I reread the series and the truth was so plain that I couldn't miss it. I'd been planning that episode for weeks, before I ever even met you...but there you and I were,

staring out of the funny papers, and I knew that I was hooked."

With luggage in hand they walked out to the parking lot. To Lesley, the Roanoke sunshine was pale in comparison to the singing brightness inside her. She was home with the man she loved.

She surveyed the parking lot looking for Travis's silver Jeep. From the corner of her eye she saw a flash of blue and with a prickle of excitement she turned to see the ancient blue pickup truck and the old farmer sitting inside. She watched in delight as he winked at her.

"Travis," she said, turning to grasp his arm as he walked toward the other end of the lot. "See the old farmer? He looks like Grandpa Silas."

Travis looked over his shoulder and shrugged. "I don't see anybody, Lesley."

She spun around. The pickup and its occupant had disappeared without a trace. Smiling to herself, she caught up with Travis. "I guess I was mistaken."

"Not about me, I hope," he countered.

"Never about you, my love. Never again about you."



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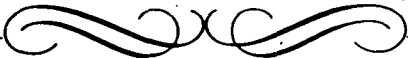


EVE GLADSTONE

A Taste of Deception



Although Kate didn't know it, she had something of Tony's that he desperately needed back. What neither of them planned on was that in their frantic search, they'd find much more than the missing object.



They had bitten. Tony Kendall's smile was one of triumph and astonishment as he walked over to the telephone and dialed.

"Okay," he said to the voice at the other end, "so far you're half a genius. Now all I have to do is track down who stole it and try to get it back."

"How far on the track are you?"

Tony glanced out his living-room window. Like white confetti celebrating the Christmas season, snow had been falling all evening.

"Considering it's 2:00 a.m.," he said, "and the last of my visitors has just left, I'd say about a foot to the left of my bedroom door. There's nothing I can do tonight but get some sleep."

"Trails grow cold, Tony."

"This one won't. You'll hear from me, Mickey." Kendall hung up and stood gazing out the window of his Greenwich Village apartment.

He was a lean, handsome man given to casual dress. His hair was a deep brown color; his eyes were a clear blue. He had an intelligent look to his face, with its strong, aquiline nose and prominent cheekbones. His mouth, now set in a determined line, could impress with its sensuality.

Evidence of the party he had just given lay everywhere about him. It would all be put to rights tomorrow by his daily maid, but he began a halfhearted attempt to clean up, carefully removing a couple of cream puffs from a Saint-Honoré cake as

he went. Then he picked up a nearly empty bottle of champagne and went into his bedroom.

The party had been in apparent celebration of the sale of a small invention of his, but in fact had been set in motion to catch a thief, and the ruse had worked. What had sat on the shelf in his kitchen to be stolen had indeed been stolen.

There was a list of party invitees on his bedside table. He picked the paper up gingerly and paced the room for a while, studying the names.

A little while later, he showered, then settled in bed with the champagne and a suspense novel. One or the other should put him to sleep soon, he hoped. But still, he would not rest easy. Mickey had told him it was his patriotic duty to let the enemy steal his new, unbreakable coding device. Now that device, contained in a black box, was somewhere in the city and out of his control.

Mickey's selling point had been neat and unarguable. "They're going to want it, Tony, and they'll get it one way or the other."

"Military application" had been the term whispered around the Pentagon; then the Central Intelligence Agency, in the person of Mickey, had been called in.

Tony had reluctantly agreed to go along, but had made a few discreet changes in the formula. If the plan backfired and Soviet scientists got

their hands on the device, it would take them longer to figure out the formula.

When the telephone rang, he was jarred, uncertain whether he had dozed off or not.

"Do you know what time it is?" he barked.

"I couldn't sleep, Tony, darling. I kept thinking of ways for you to spend that lovely money you're about to fall into. On me, of course," purred a sultry voice.

"Elyse," he said, "it will take years before I see it. Is it possible, given your life-style, that you can wait?"

Elyse Sebring laughed. "You're mad at me because I took off with Peter." She had left the party early on the arm of Tony's brother, Peter, one of whose tricks was always to try to get his girl. Only this time Peter was wrong. Elyse was a very disposable amusement.

"I hardly ever get to see Peter. I wanted to hear how his tour turned out," she said.

Spectacular, as usual, Tony told himself. It always amazed him that Peter was able to play Mozart on a concert grand in front of huge, attentive audiences, yet lead a frivolous personal life in which he was usually broke and in debt, despite his huge fees.

"Elyse," Tony said, "I'll call you tomorrow. I already know how his tour turned out. And you're drunk. Good night."

ITS BELL tinkling, the door to La Vie En Rose pastry shop closed behind Kate Manning.

"Hello, where is everyone?" Kate shook the snow off her woolen hat.

"Dolly? Emil?" She went through to the open archway that led to the rear. "Here I am again."

The back room was empty, however, and Kate stood in the doorway, dismayed that her order was in the same state as earlier. On a long wooden worktable lay neat rows of thick chocolate truffles, waiting to be packed. Shelves contained the carmine-colored cartons she had packed herself that morning. Each held a dozen one-pound boxes of truffles, with the name "Kate's Chocolate Clouds" printed in gold on the side.

Emil had apparently not put any time into her order. There were gold bows yet to be tied around each carton, too. And now, she would have to make a dozen deliveries herself by five o'clock, her driver having come down with the flu. It was Saturday. Most of the small stores that were her customers would be closed on Sunday, even so close to Christmas.

Through the open door of his office, she glimpsed the elderly, gray-bearded baker talking on the telephone. His expression was intense and he shrugged apologetically at her frown.

Kate proceeded to pull out flat boxes and knock them into shape. Then she lined each one with crisp tissue paper. If only the business would begin to show a little profit, she would get her own place, Kate thought. She had started making truffles to support her acting career, and now she was dreaming about owning her own confectionery.

Emil was really a bit of a genius for having turned her aunt Willa's simple recipe for *truffes* into the great batches Kate needed to fill the orders she had been receiving with

the approach of Christmas. She had been lucky to stumble across the baker.

She was hard at work when Emil strode in. "Pardon, my sweet," he said.

"Why isn't my order ready, Emil? I'm *desperate*," Kate said. "My driver is sick, and I've got to have all forty-eight cartons *tout de suite*. And I still have to put the bows on."

"I think they'll forgive you the bows," he said.

"You're right—I hope. I'll pack the truck if you finish the boxes. Why don't you get some help around here, Emil? Where's Dolly?"

"Dolly would have been sneezing all over your candy if I hadn't sent her home."

"You and I are the only healthy people left in the world, Emil." Kate slipped back into her coat. "I've got to be at work at five-thirty pronto," she told him. "Tonight's the last show at Shay's."

She rushed out with a few cartons and stacked them in the truck. When she returned, Emil was back on the telephone.

She shook her head, and began again. In a flurry she packed and stacked, marching back and forth to the ice-cream truck that was painted carmine with her name in gold letters. Emil was no help at all. When not on the telephone, he was waiting on customers, or removing cakes from the oven and shoving others in.

Kate was reaching for the last few cartons when she heard the bell. "Emil, get off the phone, I don't have time," she called. "Please, you have a customer."

The very last carton wore a jaunty gold bow. Kate piled it with the oth-

ers. At least something had been done right.

"Get it, chérie," Emil said.

"Impossible." Her arms were filled as she rushed through the back room. "I'll stop by on my way home tonight. We have to talk, Emil." Kate knew he would be in the shop when she came by after the last show. He was always there.

The bell jingled again and Kate peered around the cartons she was carrying, staggering under their weight. "He'll be right out."

The figure she addressed was brushing snowflakes from the front of his jacket. Then she was met by a pair of blue, quizzical eyes in a handsome face. He wore no hat, and his unruly brown hair was dusted with snowflakes.

"Let me help you with that," he said, deftly taking the topmost cartons.

She led the way through the thickening snow to her truck. The stranger piled the cartons into the truck for her while she expressed her gratitude.

"Hate to see a damsel in distress on a snowy day." His voice was rich and deep and cultured. "Are you Kate of Kate's Chocolate Clouds?" he asked.

Kate smiled. "Well, yes. How did you know?"

"I didn't. But you looked a little too pretty to make a living lugging 'clouds' around."

"I'm afraid I *am* making a living lugging 'clouds.'"

"I suppose it is a job for angels."

Kate felt her face grow warm with pleasure and embarrassment. She was about to stutter something when Emil called, "Kate, just a minute."

She turned and saw the baker gesturing toward her. When she looked back to the stranger, she was startled to catch a look of icy curiosity, directed not at her, but at Emil. It was quickly gone, as he reached out a gloved hand and took hers for a moment, warming it in the soft suede.

"Think you can manage that truck?" he asked.

"No problem."

"Kate," Emil started toward them.

"Goodbye, funny snowgirl." The man turned and walked swiftly back toward the shop, greeting Emil with a quick nod.

Kate was putting the key into the ignition when she caught a glimpse of Emil moving toward her.

"Kate, where are you going? I must talk to you."

"Emil, not now." She started the engine. "Got to run." Forty-eight cartons to deliver to a dozen shops, and all by five o'clock.

FROM INSIDE the shop, Tony Kendall watched the truck pull out. His mind strayed from the task at hand, wondering about her and thinking how damned attractive she looked, bundled up with her hat jammed close about her ears.

"*Mon dieu*," Emil said, coming in and stamping his feet. "She could not wait even a moment." In spite of the cold, a bead of sweat rolled down his forehead as he went behind the counter. "What can I do for you, Mr. Kendall? How was the Saint-Honoré?"

"The cakes were exactly as I expected," Tony replied. "I'm just sorry your delivery boy felt obliged

to remove something that belonged to me. Is he here or out on an errand?"

Emil threw his hands up. "The boy's gone; he's quit. I don't know where he is now. If he took something from you, then I'd be obliged to pay for it. But are you certain it was he? Is it valuable? My insurance—" Emil did not finish the sentence. Something in Tony's expression stopped him cold, and he turned suddenly, then headed for the rear of his shop.

Mickey was right, thought Tony. The bakery had been operating as a front for an espionage network. Emil was the perfect plant—from Rumania via Alsace-Lorraine a quarter century before.

Still, he was sorry he would have to act rough with the baker. Tony *did* like his pastries. But now he had no choice. Something valuable had been stolen from him, and he would have to talk as though he would not stop until he got it back. That was the scenario. Emil had to understand that Tony would not go to the authorities about the theft, not yet; that what he had lost was too secret to raise any kind of public fuss.

Tony went over to the street door and turned the lock, taking a moment to twist the sign face-out that said the owner would return in fifteen minutes.

Emil had retreated to his office. The look of real fear on the old baker's face confirmed Tony's suspicions.

"Let's have it, Emil," he said, his voice low. "It was a black box, just about the size of a Saint-Honoré cake," Tony stated. "Your delivery boy took it from my kitchen shelf

when he made the delivery last night."

"What? I don't know what you're talking about. You can see for yourself I know nothing about it." He waved his arm weakly around. "If you are so upset, I suggest you call the police."

"Is that what you really want?"

The baker reached out for his telephone.

"Go ahead," Tony said. "Call your contact. There's nothing I'd like better." He went quickly behind the desk, grabbed the baker by his collar and pushed him up against a file cabinet. "I want it, and I want it now."

"You're mistaken; there is no box. See for yourself." Emil tried to push Tony back.

"That boy might not have known what it meant, but you do, don't you, Emil? You knew exactly where it was in my apartment, when I made the fool mistake of asking you to drop by to discuss my order."

"No." The baker's voice was a hoarse whisper as his eyes darted past Tony to the door.

Tony loosened his grip. "I'm a fairly reasonable fellow, Emil, and you're scared. I want the box now. I'd lay odds it's around here somewhere. Where? In the file drawers? I'll rip the place apart if I have to. What kind of game are you playing, anyway?"

Emil drew a couple of ragged breaths. "My heart," he said. "They'll kill me."

"Who?" Tony held his breath.

"It's gone. She has it." His laugh was sudden, without mirth. "You want your—whatever it is, you'll have to find her."

Trouble. Things had been going a little too smoothly. Until now. Tony seized the baker's arm and twisted it behind his back. "Spill it—everything, my friend."

Emil squealed once with pain. "I was just following orders," he whispered. "They were supposed to pick it up at nine this morning. The snow must have held them up. I got worried."

"You hid the damn thing."

Emil nodded. "I put it into one of those red cartons and tied a gold ribbon around it. I meant to keep it back when we loaded her truck but when she came in, they were on the phone."

"She? You mean the brunette who was just here?"

"Kate Manning. She has your damn box."

"And she doesn't know a thing?"

Emil shrugged. "Why should she?"

Tony let go Emil. "Give me her list of customers."

"I don't have them. I'm just her supplier."

"Where's her place of business?" asked Tony.

"Her apartment. On Perry. You won't catch up with her until midnight. She sings at Shay's Cabaret."

THE APPLAUSE was loud and appreciative, a Saturday-night, last-show kind of applause, with every table occupied. Kate kicked high once again, and followed Bonnie Neel offstage.

"Kate, there's a chorus call on Monday for a new Carl Dietz musical," Bonnie told her in the dressing room. "Dietz likes leggy brunettes. You ought to go."

Kate groaned. "I know, but I have deliveries to make on Monday. Why are they casting a show so close to Christmas, anyway?"

"You'll have to make up your mind, Kate," Bonnie was saying. "It's the theater or truffles. With the show closing, you're out of a job."

"Shay promised," Kate began.

"Shay is always promising," Bonnie said. She was a close friend of Kate's, a tall blonde. "He wants a breather. He's going to stick with me and the piano until spring, but you can't count on him to include you in the new show. Nice as he is, he's also very impulsive."

At that moment, Shay poked his bald, bony head in the door. "There's a guy in the audience would like to talk to you, Kate."

"Shay-ay," Kate said, "two performances a night don't mean I have to mingle with the audience."

He smiled. "This one claims he's a buddy of what's-his-name, your bakery guy."

"Emil." She made a face. "I wonder what it's all about."

After putting on khaki wool pants, a wide-necked sweater and high, warm boots, Kate tugged her coat on. "I suppose I'm ready." She sighed.

"Come on," Bonnie said, smiling. "I've got good vibes. Your star is in the ascendancy, you'll see."

Kate laughed, her mood lightened. "I'll see you later." Then she made her way, for the last time, out of the tiny backstage area.

The room was still crowded, but she found him at once, her heart doing an unexpected flip. Without even thinking about it, she had known for

a certainty who the man waiting for her would be.

When she reached his table, he stood up quickly.

"Hello," she said, holding her hand out.

"I'm Tony Kendall," he said, and held her hand a shade too long. "Can I induce you to join me?"

It struck Kate that if she were to refuse his invitation, she might save adding to an already complicated life.

"Just for a moment," she said, ignoring the inner warnings. "It was our last night, and I've a party to go to."

"I understand." He helped her out of her coat.

"Did Emil send you?" she asked.

"I said I was a friend of Emil's," he smiled.

"Emil makes chocolate truffles for me, but I know nothing about him. Being a friend of his is no recommendation one way or the other."

Tony seemed curiously relieved at her remark. "Will you have something to drink?" he asked.

He wanted to get off the subject of Emil, she thought. "Oh, maybe some espresso," she said.

He signaled for the waiter, ordering espresso for Kate and some brandy for himself.

"I enjoyed your act," he said, turning back to her. "And your costumes. I saw you here three or four months ago and thought you were beautiful and talented then, too."

She had the odd feeling that he was not telling the truth.

"So you dreamed about me nightly."

He laughed. "Imagine the coincidence of running into you at Emil's."

"Amazing," she said.

The waiter brought their order and after she had sipped her espresso, she went on, "I have the impression that I'm going to have to carry the conversation, unless you tell me who you are and why you're here."

For a moment he regarded her unwaveringly. "Who am I?" He smiled. "Born in upstate New York some thirty-five years ago and educated at Harvard. I live in Greenwich Village and buy all my baked goods at La Vie En Rose. That's about it, Ms. Manning."

"Kate," she told him. "Does your being here have anything to do with Emil?"

"Why did you run off this afternoon?"

"You mean when Emil called me? All he wanted me to do was watch his shop. He has the most colossal nerve. But what's that got to do with you?"

"You're an attractive woman. Any man who meets a woman like you wants to get to know her." He looked at her over the rim of his glass. "The mystery of what I'm doing here is all cleared up."

But not quite, she thought, and glanced quickly at her watch.

"The party, of course," he commented. "Tell me, is Kate's Chocolate Clouds a nationwide conglomerate, or can I buy a box at my corner candy store?"

She put her chin on her hands. "Emil carries them, didn't you notice?"

"Yes, of course," he responded smoothly, "but I haven't tried them

yet. I'd try some now, though. You wouldn't happen to have any in your truck?"

"Tony, I'm afraid not even the fragrance of chocolate is left in the truck." He was being too casual, too charming. "You wouldn't be a competitor, would you, trying to discover my aunt Willa's recipe?"

His laugh was abrupt. "As a matter of fact, I'm an inventor, but not of *truffles*."

She sat back and regarded him. "What do you invent?"

"Ways to make the world run better."

Kate brushed her fingers quickly through her hair. "I'm always thinking of things I wish someone would invent. For instance, I would like a robot to prepare my truffles, one to pack them and a third to deliver them."

"And Kate will disappear completely?" he asked.

"Kate," she said, "it is to be hoped, will be appearing on Broadway in a long-running play."

"But there will be a dozen stores in town wondering why there are nuts and bolts in the centers instead of chocolate cream," he answered.

Kate laughed. "All your fault, Inventor Kendall."

"I'll apologize to Bloomingdale's personally."

"And Zabar's." She saw a faint look of satisfaction cross his face. She had let her guard down, just what he was waiting for. But *why*? "I'm afraid I must be going," she said coldly.

"I'll see you home."

"No, no, that won't be necessary," she told him.

"It's midnight," he said. "No time for you to be running all over the city alone."

"I can take care of myself. I don't even know you."

He followed her out into the bitter cold. It had stopped snowing. "I'd still like to see you home," he said.

"I'm sorry, Tony," she said. "I can think of a million reasons why you shouldn't see me home, but..." She shrugged.

He drew her close quickly, placing his lips against hers in a light, warm kiss, then releasing her. "Tomorrow, then. I must see you."

A cab pulled up in front, and she ran quickly to the curb. "Impossible. I'll be helping Emil with my truffles and doing a million things. Sorry." She was not reacting properly to his kiss, she thought. She should have been shaking with rage.

He held the door for her. "Breakfast," he stated.

"No, absolutely not." He had tricked her, charmed her, but he was holding something back.

"What's your address?" he asked.

"Twenty-five Perry," she told the driver, closing the door quickly. As soon as the cab pulled away, Kate tapped the glass. "Driver, I want to make another stop on the way."

She turned to see Tony Kendall hailing another cab.

*

LAFAYETTE and Fourth came up suddenly, dark streets full of shops closed against the night.

"There," Kate told the cabbie. "That bakery, La Vie En Rose."

The driver slowed, peering through the window.

The store window itself was dark. "I don't understand," she said. "Usually there's a small light on." She asked the driver to stop anyway. "It looks as if he's not in, but I want to make sure."

That faint sense of apprehension returned, and again Kate had no idea why. She stepped out of the cab and went to peer inside of the shop.

"Empty!" Through the glow cast by the street lamp at the corner, she was able to see that only the counter and shelves remained. The shop had been abandoned: chairs, signs, cash register, even the false cake tops with greetings on them that had stood in the rear case. Emil was gone with all his props—and perhaps even with her aunt's truffle recipe.

"Why?" she asked. The word seemed lost in the vast, snowy silence. She went quickly back to the cab.

"Twenty-five Perry," she told the driver, settling back in her seat. There were explanations for everything. She remembered Emil's calling her, running toward her, then stopping. And the look of icy curiosity in Tony Kendall's eyes. She shivered lightly.

Suddenly there was a grinding of gears, and Kate was tossed sideways as the cabdriver swore aloud.

The car that came up from behind nipped the cab on the right side, metal meeting metal. The cabbie pulled up short. "Sorry, lady." He was about to open his door when two men from the other car came rapidly toward the cab.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" The cabdriver stepped quickly out into the street, but he was no match for the two gi-

ants in somber coats and low-brimmed hats.

"Just stay there and you won't get hurt." The man had a deep voice with a faint accent. He pulled the door open and both men peered in at Kate. "You'd better come with us, miss."

"Wait a minute," Kate said, her heart hammering. "I'll give you all the money I have." She took a deep breath, wondering whether she really could scream, and slid across the seat, away from the hand reaching for her.

"Don't try any funny stuff." The other door opened, and the second man blocked her exit. Kate raked her fingernails across his face.

"Why, you little—" he said, straining back.

"Hey, hold it—you can't do that!" The cabbie reached inside for his call phone. "I'll get the cops."

But at that moment Kate let loose the waterfall of her scream. And almost as if in answer, a police car turned into the cross street, lights flashing, siren in full cry.

Without a word, both men ran back to their car. Moments later, it screeched crazily away.

To Kate's horror, the police car flew by, continuing down the cross street without stopping.

"How do you like that?" the cabbie said. "Just when you need them. Come on, we'll try to catch up."

"Just take me to Perry Street," she told him, still shaking. He was examining the cab's door.

"Listen, lady," he said, "I'll need your name and address. This is a hot one. They damaged the door."

"No problem." Kate leaned back.

"You okay, lady?" The cabdriver peered in at her.

"I think so."

He settled heavily into his seat again. "Twenty-five Perry," he said. "Let's go."

When the cab stopped in front of the narrow, tall building where Kate rented a small studio apartment, she sighed with relief.

The stairs leading to the front entrance had been sprinkled with salt, the snow partially melted. Kate wearily climbed the half-dozen steps to the carved mahogany door. She stamped her feet and shook the snow from her coat before entering the inner hallway, which smelled pleasantly of wax and steam heat.

"Home," she breathed, "and safe."

She began to walk slowly upstairs, thinking about the nice, hot bath she would take. She would let everything float away, even that peculiar scene in front of Emil's shop. A case of mistaken identity, surely.

Kate stepped inside her tiny apartment with a deep sigh, but it was cut off in mid-breath as a blast of cold air hit her. Automatically she reached for the light switch.

"Oh, no, no!" She put her hand to her mouth, unable to move. Her studio had been ransacked. Her clothes, the contents of her closets, her books—everything spilled out onto the floor.

"Not again, not another burglary," she murmured. The last time, a year before, the burglars had removed her jewelry, a typewriter and a mink hat her mother had sent her for Christmas.

"Stay there and don't move."

Kate was brusquely gripped from behind by two strong hands and thrust to the floor. Tony Kendall crouched low, then moved past her to the curtains fluttering at the open window.

"Kate, stay down. They might still be around," he said, securing as best he could the iron window gate that had been forced open.

"They? Who are *they*, and what are you doing here?" Kate edged quietly back toward the open door.

Kendall slammed the window shut and locked it, then drew the curtains together quickly. He turned swiftly toward her. "Where the devil do you think you're going?"

Kate stopped dead at the door. "How did you get in here, anyway?" she asked.

"They haven't invented a lock I can't pick," he said, smiling.

"Yes, of course," she said. "Inventor Kendall. I suppose you can walk through walls, too. Would you mind explaining yourself?"

"And if they haven't found what they're looking for," he added in a quiet voice, "they'll be back."

"Who are *they*?" She slipped out into the hall. "I'm going for the police."

"Kate? What's all the noise about? I heard all this slamming around a while ago. I'm telling you, it scared the devil out of me." Petra Clark, Kate's next-door neighbor, came out into the hall. She looked past Kate to Tony Kendall. "Oh," she said.

"Petra, I was just going to ring your bell," she said.

At that moment Tony came over and took hold of Kate's hand. "Nothing to worry about, Petra," he

said smoothly. "Foolish Kate, she left the window open, and the wind knocked the place around a bit." He gave Petra a dazzling smile, then put an arm around Kate's shoulders and directed her gently back into her apartment, kissing her on the ear.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kate tried to break away from him as he closed the door. "Petra saw you very clearly, and she won't forget."

"I hope she won't," Tony remarked, gripping her arm. "You've got to trust me. Your friend has seen me, understand? You've got to trust me."

"Trust you?" She pulled away. "What do you want? What are you doing here?" She went back to the door and grabbed the handle.

"Listen to me, Kate," he said firmly. "We're wasting time. You're in trouble, and your life could be in danger. I don't think this was a simple break-in, not by a long shot." He looked around. "Emil said you use this place as your office. What about your company books?"

"They're not here. My accountant takes care of all that. What have my books got to do with anything?" And then it came to her all at once. "Those two men who attacked me. Did you have anything to do with them?"

"What two men, Katie?"

"You don't know, do you?" She felt the most curious sense of relief. No, he did not know.

He was silent, his jaw set. "What happened?"

"I'd gone to La Vie En Rose. I wanted to talk to Emil." She felt her face grow warm. She had wanted to talk to Emil about Tony Kendall.

"But it's gone—the shop, everything. As if it never existed."

"Tell me again." His face was impassive, although she was certain he had paled a bit.

She repeated the story, then told him what had happened in the cab.

"Would you recognize them again?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it. I scratched one of them. He was big, square-faced. Dead serious. I scratched his cheek."

"He got that close." Tony's lips made a thin, angry line.

"And now I think it's time to call the police," she told him, waving a hand around her apartment.

"Forget it. If nothing was stolen, they'll tell you they can't help you. I don't want you to call them, Kate."

"Just try and stop me." She dialed her police precinct, using the number she had pasted on the telephone.

Before it began to ring, however, Tony wrested the receiver from her. "Keep the police out of this for the time being. Those truffles of yours, the ones I helped you load. I want your list of deliveries."

"You *what*?"

"Kate." Tony put both hands on her arms. "You have no idea what's going on, and I don't want you involved."

"Involved in what?" she said impatiently.

"Kate, listen to me," he said. "The list of deliveries you made today. Do you have it, or is it here in the apartment? Did they find it, or not?"

She looked quickly over at her bag on the couch and understood at once

that she had just done exactly what he wanted.

"It's obvious that fool Emil told them you have it. Now I need that list. Something was inadvertently packed in with your order—in one of your red cartons, to be exact. You've delivered it to one of your customers." He paused and gazed at her. "Unless you've known all along what I'm talking about."

"I *don't*," she assured him. "I packed the orders myself. Twelve one-pound boxes of truffles in each carton."

"There was one carton you didn't pack."

"That's not true." But as she said this, she remembered the carton with the gold ribbon around it.

"Let me have the list, Kate."

"You're crazy."

Tony picked up Kate's shoulder bag and spilled the contents out.

"You—" She ran over and tried to pull him away. "The list is in my head," she told him.

"What's this?" He held up a sheaf of orders, written in her own code, and waved them at her.

She gave him a triumphant smile. "You're so clever, figure it out for yourself."

He leafed quickly through the delivery tickets, his brow furrowed. She thought, looking at him covertly as she folded a sweater, that somehow she knew he would not harm her.

He tucked the papers into his coat pocket. "Come on, leave all this. You're getting out of here."

Instead, Kate marched back to the telephone. "I'm calling the police."

"Be my guest," he said coolly. "You won't be around when they arrive."

"I see. You're going to drag me out of here against my will. I'll mention that to them, too." She dialed. "I'd like to report a break-in," she announced to the voice at the other end, then gave the flat-voiced operator the details.

"Nobody was hurt, nothing taken?"

She was silent for a moment, then said, "No."

The flat voice would dispatch a police car sometime in the next century. "Goodbye," Kate said, and banged the receiver down.

"I'll leave," she told Tony promptly, "because I wouldn't stay overnight here in a million years. Just give me the delivery tickets and then I'll go."

"If I do, I'll stick to you like glue."

"What do you intend to do with them?"

"Look for a carton with a gold ribbon around it."

"What's in it?"

"That shouldn't concern you. The less you know, the healthier it'll be."

"I'm expected to give you a list of my customers and you won't even tell me what it's all about."

"I have the list," he reminded her.

"So you do. I'm going to call a cab now. I'd appreciate it if you'd leave." Kate phoned for a cab, giving Shay's address as her destination. Then she dialed Shay and asked for Bonnie, who agreed to give her the key to her apartment.

"Keep the list," Kate told him then. "Just get out of here and get out of my life."

Tony Kendall was welcome to the delivery tickets. She was certain there was not one word on them that he

would understand. As for the list of her customers, the names were filed neatly away in her head.

BONNIE KEPT her finger on the buzzer until Kate pulled the heavy door open and walked into a small lobby. There was a freight elevator in the rear that led right into Shay's SoHo loft space, but Kate chose the stairs.

Bonnie was waiting for her on the landing. "You made it," she announced, grabbing Kate's overnight bag. "Left is the party, and right is the bedroom, where you can stash this stuff. Did they take anything?"

"Not my television, stereo, or typewriter. According to Tony, they were after something else."

"Who's Tony?"

"That," Kate said, "is a big question."

"A cop?"

"He's the mysterious fan who waited to see me after the act. Things haven't been the same since. If you have five minutes, I'll tell you what I *think* happened."

Bonnie stepped into the room and closed the door. "Better make it ten minutes. You have that I've-just-met-the-man-of-my-dreams look about you."

When they emerged from the bedroom, Bonnie was as nonplussed about Tony Kendall as Kate.

"You're sure he can't get at the stores on the list?"

Kate sighed. "I did acknowledge Bloomingdale's and Zabar's at the club, in all my innocence."

"It's Sunday," Bonnie said.

"Both stores are open."

"Skeleton staff," Kate said. "They'd never let him into the stockroom."

"You'll have to lay low so he can't find you."

"Count on it." And yet she did not want to believe she had seen the last of Tony Kendall.

Kate followed Bonnie into the studio, and someone handed her a glass of champagne.

"The conquering heroine." Shay planted a loud kiss on her cheek.

"Bonnie told me about the break-in," Shay took Kate's hand and led her to where his guests lounged on thick pillows along the walls. There were half a dozen chairs in the center of the room. "We were just going to do a reading of Casper's new play," he told her, as the playwright waved at her from across the room.

"Wonderful," Kate said, taking the script he held out for her and sitting down.

Bonnie sat next to her. "Same old Casper James junk," she whispered.

The play made no sense to Kate at all, but she was halfway through her speech when the doorbell rang.

Shay went, then returned and caught Kate's eye. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the door.

Kate looked around briefly, to see Tony Kendall leaning against a pillar at the entrance to the studio.

After she had finished reading, she walked over to him. "What are you doing here?" she asked in a low, irritated whisper.

He took her arm and drew her back toward the kitchen. "I want the list."

"The list, damn you, is in my head, where you can't get at it. Un-

less you think you can arm-twist it out of me."

"I'm not in the habit of wrestling women to the ground," he said. "I want you to listen to me. I haven't been following you around because you're beautiful and I want you, although God knows I do. It's a matter of life and death."

"My life?"

"More than that," he said quietly and drew her against him, his lips descending on hers with just enough pressure to send a charge of electricity through her.

It was too good; it made her a little afraid of him, but for another reason entirely. Kate pulled abruptly away. "You're taking a little too much for granted, Tony. I'll listen. I'm not guaranteeing I'll believe you."

"You're on," he said.

"There's an all-night delicatessen a couple of blocks away," Kate told him as they descended the stairs. "It's nice, neutral territory. What time is it?"

"Two-thirty," he told her. "What time did you get up?"

"Seven a.m. And yes," she added, "I am tired."

They reached the ground floor, Kate several steps ahead of Tony, who had her overnight case. As she went toward the door, she heard a scuffling sound and the loud plop of her suitcase as it hit the tile floor.

"Don't move and you won't get hurt." The voice was deep, with a faint, familiar accent. Kate turned and found Tony backing away from two shadowy figures.

Without a word, Tony connected with the jaw of the shorter man, who stumbled back and hit his head on

the metal banister. He slumped down with a sigh.

Tony turned and struck out at the other man bearing down on him, but was pushed against the wall. About to buzz Shay's loft, Kate stopped short. The small can of hair spray in her bag would do just fine. As Tony went down, the giant turned and started moving toward her, a vicious smile on his face.

Kate recognized the scratch marks on his cheek, and her heart jumped. She glanced at Tony, slowly pulling himself up. Then she wrenched the top off the hair spray. As the assailant came toward her, she raised the can and pointed it straight at his face. The angry hiss of spray caught him full in the eyes, temporarily blinding him. He gagged and staggered forward, one hand covering his face. She knew he would recover only too quickly, and moved back, her finger still on the nozzle. And then, unexpectedly, it jammed. Kate tossed the can away and grabbed her overnight case. "Are you okay?" Tony was standing now, but looking pale. "Back to Shay's or out of here?"

"My car's around the corner," he said, his voice a trifle hoarse. "Let's get moving."

"MAYBE I'LL WAIT out here." Kate handed Tony the keys to Bonnie Neel's apartment, deciding that since this was his problem, he should handle it.

He took the keys with a smile she thought was entirely too self-satisfied. "I see," he said, "that at last you're beginning to understand my value."

"Not really. It's just been a long day."

"Here we go," he said, then prowled the three small rooms of Bonnie's apartment.

"Safe as treasury notes," he assured her, coming back and motioning her to close the door.

"Thank you for the detective work," she said. "And for seeing me safely home."

Instead of saying good-night, he pulled her gently into the small foyer and closed the door. "Kate," he said, "at what point are you going to begin to trust me?"

"When you present me with a notarized statement from your psychiatrist that you're not certifiable."

"Katie, you just saved my life back there. According to an old Gypsy custom, you're now responsible for me until the end of my days."

"At the rate you're going," she remarked caustically, "that shouldn't be too long in coming."

"You mean you still don't believe me?"

They stood regarding each other. "I guess that was some adventure," she said after a while, if only to stop the feeling she had, of wanting to be in his arms. "Care to tell me who they are and why they're after me... you... us?"

"How about talking over coffee? I brew a mean cup."

Kate was grateful and pleased. Picking up her overnight case, she went into Bonnie's tiny bedroom, opened the bag and pulled out her favorite old navy-blue dressing gown.

When she came back into the living room, feeling cozy and infinitely

better, Tony was still clattering around the kitchen.

"Hello out there," she called.

"Sugar? Cream?"

"The works." She lay down full-length on the sofa and closed her eyes, trying to keep her mind carefully blank. It was no time to begin worrying about her truffles and where her carmine cartons had gone. First things first. For instance, the list Tony and the unnamed thugs were apparently after. And what would happen if any of them got to her customers. And lastly, the black box Tony talked about. What if one of her customers found *it* in a carton instead of twelve one-pound boxes of chocolates? She yawned.

KATE SAT UP abruptly, peering about. Seven-thirty in the morning. Tony! And then she remembered—or was it a dream? She had stretched out on the living-room couch, waiting for coffee. And then what? Tony had cradled her in his arms for a moment. She had curled into him, raising her arms around his neck, he had bent to kiss her, and she had clung to him, pulling him down. His kiss had been long and sensuous, as if he could not let her go. Kate flushed, remembering his words. "Not now, Katie, not this way." His voice had been low. "When I make love to you, it will be when you're awake, not half in a dream."

How am I going to handle this? she worriedly asked herself, then retreated to the bathroom, stripped down, stepped into the shower and stood under its pelting warmth for a long while. Later, feeling wide awake at last, she dressed in brown leather pants and a bulky beige sweater, all

she had brought from her apartment.

There was a smell of coffee and slightly burned toast when she emerged.

"Sleep well?" Tony asked.

"I must have," she said, catching his eye and realizing that something extraordinary had just passed between them. "Look, about last night..." she began. The telephone rang, and Kate ran thankfully to pick it up. "Maybe it's Bonnie."

Whatever might be happening between her and Tony Kendall, she did not want to acknowledge it until she knew for certain who he was.

She picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Kate Manning?"

She drew her breath in quickly. "Excuse me," she said.

But the telephone went dead. Kate stood looking at the receiver until Tony gently took it from her. "You're white as a ghost."

"Someone asked for me. A man," she said.

"Did you know the voice?"

"How could I? All he said was, 'Kate Manning?'"

She allowed herself to be led into the kitchen. "The snow's stopped," she said, glancing out.

"Dig in."

She obediently took up her fork. "Start at the beginning, Tony, and make me trust you, or I've no choice but to go to the police." She began slowly to eat the eggs and bacon Tony had prepared.

"We call it Operation Black Box—" he began, but Kate interrupted him.

"We?"

"The government and yours truly."

"The CIA? The FBI?"

He ignored her question. "What it is," he went on, "is simply a new method of coding and a new way to transmit that coding, all virtually unbreakable by our friends on the other side. Do I bore you?"

"So far I'm with you. Top-secret. Go on."

"The invention relates to practically every area of communication in which information is stored, processed and transmitted. What makes it so popular in certain foreign and domestic quarters, Kate, is that it has military applications."

She closed her eyes for just a second, letting a river of fear wash over her. "All right, I understand. My truffles have become involved in a possible international incident."

"All I want," he said, "is your list of deliveries. And I'll want you with me, because if I let you out of my sight, they'll find you, and you already know what they're like."

"Tony, I bumped into you outside Emil's. That's the first time I met you. The second time when you tracked me down at the cabaret. The third time was at my apartment." She eyed him closely. "By the way, how do I know you weren't the madman who broke in?"

For the first time, she saw a black look come over his face.

"You want to know a little more about that enigmatic stranger called Tony Kendall," he said. "Tell you what, Katie, I'm going to oblige because I want you on my side. Come on, finish up and put your socks on. Do you know the pianist Peter Kendall?"

"Yes," she said. "Do you mean you're related to him?"

"My brother. He'll give me the imprimatur that should make you trust me a little more, Katie," Tony said in a kindly tone. "We'll stay five minutes."

That past spring, she had heard Kendall play with the New York Philharmonic. Now that she thought about it, there *was* a family look. "You're on," she said.

*

PETER KENDALL'S valet, a small pugnacious man with dark red hair that looked dyed, answered the door. "Mr. Kendall will be right with you," he stated, leading them into an austere furnished living room dominated by a white grand piano that stood by a huge floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the river.

"Oh, what a beautiful room!" Kate exclaimed.

"No doubt he's in arrears for it," Tony snapped. He prowled the room, stopping at photographs of his brother at the White House. Small world, he thought. His brother had performed for the president while he, Tony, was engaged in an operation to preserve everything that office represented.

They waited in silence for five minutes, until Peter Kendall came in, his arm draped about Elyse Sebring. Tony cursed himself for having brought Kate there, when he might have gone a dozen other routes to prove his identity.

Elyse advanced on them as if they had come into her apartment rather than Peter's and she would have to make the best of it.

It was Kate's beauty that set her off, Tony thought with amusement. Score one for him. His next goal was to remove Kate from the premises as soon as possible.

"And this is?" Elyse said, then kissed Tony softly on the lips. "Pete's newest fan?" She held her hand out to Kate. "Well, you *are* lovely. You're going to make Pete's day."

Tony introduced the two women. "And that chap over there, slouching in the doorway, is Peter Kendall."

Peter, wearing a white, bulky-knit Irish sweater over a dark shirt and pants, bore a remarkable resemblance to Tony, although his dark hair was flecked with gray, and he had recently grown a lavish mustache. They also shared an air of self-assurance and elegance.

Peter Kendall came over to Kate and grasped her hand. "Well, and where has my baby brother been keeping you?"

"He hasn't," Kate said, flushing. "We've really just met."

Elyse put her arm through Tony's. "That was a marvelous party you gave the other night. I hated to leave. Have you managed to forgive me?"

"I managed. Kate, tell Pete about your record collection and then we'll go."

"Ridiculous," his brother said. "I've ordered breakfast all around, and I'm planning on spending the afternoon looking into this lady's eyes. Kate, is that it?"

Tony knew perfectly well that Peter had asked his valet to interrupt them in about five minutes with a message about a phone call. "We've

had breakfast, Pete. Come on, Kate, say your piece and let's go."

"Well, I must say," Kate remarked, "I somehow thought—" Then she turned to Tony. "I don't know what I thought."

"She thought concert pianists talked esoteric language only, and never flirted with beautiful women, and never had hangovers. Discipline, I think they call it," Tony stated flatly.

Peter laughed. "Discipline indeed. Not with getting to sleep at dawn. What do you want to say about me, Kate of the kiss-me-Kate variety?"

"She's in the entertainment business, too," Tony remarked. There was something in the air he did not like, and he wanted Kate well away from it.

He left the living room and, in the kitchen, found the valet making coffee. "About that message my brother told you to deliver in five minutes," he said. "He would like it moved up to about now."

"Yes, sir."

Tony smiled to himself. Mission accomplished. If they got a move on, he and Kate could cover Bloomingdale's and Zabar's and whatever other store she had listed in her head.

The valet returned. "He said breakfast all around."

Tony went back into the living room to find Peter sitting on the couch with Kate, her hand nestled in his. Tony felt a rush of cold anger, which he preferred not to link to jealousy.

Elyse, her expression icy, stood in the foyer wrapped in her mink coat. "Come on, Tony," she said. "I've ordered a cab. See me into it."

"Where are you off to?" He opened the door.

"I must touch home base every now and then. Pete?"

Kate turned and caught Tony's eyes, a look of embarrassment on her face.

"Elyse, I'll call you," Peter said.

Tony could not resist a low laugh and the urge to smash his brother in the jaw. Instead, he directed Elyse toward the elevator.

When he got back to the apartment, he found Kate and Peter still sitting on the couch, talking earnestly. The valet had served muffins and coffee.

Tony went over to the closet and got their coats. "Come on, Katie, I made that reservation at Tavern on the Green for twelve on the button. If we're going to walk over, we'd better move."

"Tony!" Kate jumped up and came over to him, her eyes shining. "Your brother knows Carl Dietz!"

"Poker pal," Peter said, ambling toward the piano.

"You mean the stage director?" Tony said.

"I told Peter about the chorus call for Monday," Kate went on. "He's going to talk to Dietz about me."

Peter sat down at the piano and slammed out a few dramatic notes as though to prevent Tony's answer.

"And where can I get in touch with you, Kate?" Peter asked.

Tony gave her a faint warning shake of his head. "Call Tony," she said. "He'll get in touch with me."

"WHAT WAS THAT about Tavern on the Green?" Kate asked when they were out in the street.

"Come on," he said, taking her elbow, "Bloomingdale's is a fast walk from here. It's bloody late."

"You're a snake-oil salesman," she said, "you know that. But all right." She tucked her arm through his as they quickly crossed the avenue.

The saleslady in Bloomingdale's candy shop told Kate that Mrs. Brean, the Sunday manager, took an early lunch hour.

"When will she be back?" Kate asked her.

"Half hour, forty-five minutes maybe."

"Do you think I could take ten minutes to check over the order I delivered yesterday? I'm Kate Manning of Chocolate Clouds. I packed one carton wrong, and we don't know where we delivered it. It's terribly important that I find it."

"I don't understand," the saleslady said. "Your manager was here early this morning. He was so frantic, Mrs. Brean let him check the cartons right away. Mr. Laurent, I think his name was." She smiled. "Told me to call him Emil."

It was a moment before Kate could speak. "Oh, then he's ahead of us," she said brightly. "And so he found it."

"No, he was very disappointed," said the woman.

The man who had preceded them was or was not Emil Laurent. Pressed for a description, the saleslady recalled a gray beard and an accent—easy enough disguises.

At Zabar's, the best-known gourmet shop in New York, Kate approached a short, stout salesman who seemed to know her. They spoke for a few minutes, and Tony,

standing behind her, put his hand protectively around her waist. He felt her stiffen briefly, then she continued.

"No one, then, Mr. Leonard? Fine. Do you think I might just check the cartons I delivered yesterday?"

"I'll have to ask the manager," Mr. Leonard said. "I don't see why he'd object," he added. "He hasn't paid for them yet."

When he came back, however, he said, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Your gray-bearded friend was here early this morning, before I came in."

Kate gave Tony a look of entreaty, and he asked to see the manager.

"Won't do any good," Leonard said. "Seems a party stopped in the store yesterday for two cartons. Twenty-four pounds of chocolate! Paid cash, too. Said it was his wife's birthday and he was going to hide a diamond ring in one of them."

"And what did our gray-bearded friend say to that?" Tony asked calmly, treating it all as a joke.

"He didn't, apparently. The manager wasn't in yet."

"Where's Mac?" Kate asked briskly.

"In back." Leonard went to his counter, where a few customers waited. "Better fill another order between now and Christmas," he said. "Tell Mac I said so."

"I'll try." She sighed.

They found Mac at a desk piled high with invoices, and sample packages of all kinds of edibles. He looked up at Kate and, without her even asking him, said in a gruff, good-natured voice, "Cleve Brenner, evening anchor on Channel

Two. Buys here all the time. Newlywed, third time around, if you ask me. You want him for publicity, right? News travels fast."

"I'm just curious, Mac," Kate said. "Was one of the cartons tied with a gold ribbon?"

"From what the saleslady told me yesterday," Mac said, "Brenner walks in and wants to take the whole works. As for gold ribbons, I don't know a thing. The saleslady is off today, skiing somewhere."

"Do you think the stock boy would know about the ribbon?"

"If you don't, why would he?"

Kate looked at Tony, who merely shrugged. "Mr. Leonard said I should repeat the order," she told Mac, "but I can't promise."

"See what you can do. Christmas is the time you'll build up your following."

When Kate and Tony reached the sidewalk, the sun was high, radiating December warmth down into the city.

"Cleve Brenner," Kate said. "What if he'd been your average, uninteresting millionaire? We'd never have learned who he was."

"Think, Katie. Our anchorman goes home with two cartons of chocolates. He opens both of them to hide a diamond ring in one of the twenty-four boxes they contain. If my black box was in either carton, he'd have high-tailed it back to Zabar's. He has not done so. As for Emil, he had no idea whether you actually delivered the goods to Zabar's. He just remembered that they were a customer. We're back to square one."

THE BRILLIANT Crystal Room of Tavern on the Green was like the conservatory of an ice palace. The restaurant was crowded, but Kate and Tony were shown to a table at the window looking out on Central Park.

After Tony had ordered wine and their lunch, he said, "What I'm really curious about is one Kate Manning. Tell me something about her."

"You can't let up for a minute, can you? Tell you what," Kate said. "I'm going to make the first move toward complete trust." She rummaged in her bag for a scratch pad and pen. She set to work, listing all the stores she had visited the day before.

"There," she said at last, tearing out the paper and handing it to him. "It's all yours, my famous list. Small bonbon shops that dot the city and almost certainly won't be open today."

He folded the list and tucked it in his pocket. "Not even so close to Christmas."

"Don't you think you ought to memorize it and then let it self-destruct?"

He was a long time answering. "Oh, we're going to go over every one of those names when they serve the espresso, and then I'm going to telephone each one. Drink up, love—the day isn't nearly over."

"No, it isn't, and it certainly isn't how I contemplated spending the Sunday before Christmas, either." One should fall in love, Kate thought, over glasses of wine, with rosebuds in crystal vases sending up a soft, intimate fragrance, and seasonal decorations all around.

"Tell me about Kate Manning," Tony said again.

She laughed, feeling the most remarkable sensuality in his tone. "Let's see," she began. "Kate Manning, army brat. Father a colonel who settled in Cleveland after his retirement. Kid brother, seven years younger than I, a math whiz in his senior year at college, so now you know my age." She stopped and smiled. "Are you bored?"

"No." He reached across the table and put his hand over hers. She felt a ripple of pleasure run through her as he turned her hand over and stared at her palm.

"What do you see?"

"A long, happy life. Beginning when we chase my invention down."

"You know, it's to my benefit to catch up with Emil, isn't it?" she remarked. "It's that, or go home and begin making truffles, except that I'm all out of a hundred pounds of chocolate."

Kate was prevented from further comment by the arrival of their food. It was only later, over coffee, that Tony returned to the business at hand.

"Twelve stores, each with two or more cartons?"

"I can tell you who ordered what."

"Let's get on with it. And then I'll make some phone calls."

"TONY, NO ONE is open today, and that's that. You don't intend to track my shopkeepers at home, do you?" Kate was trying to keep up with Tony's determined pace through the park. "Will you slow down," she said at last. "I feel as if I'm trying

out for the chorus at Radio City Music Hall." And then she stopped dead. "I must get to exercise class!" she cried.

"On a Sunday?"

"I'm trying out for the Carl Dietz musical tomorrow, remember? I can't throw the day away like this, hopping around after you while you figure what's next on the agenda. I have a million things to do. Make up some truffles, for one. Find chocolate and butter and eggs and what-all. And then there's my apartment, which has not, I'm sure, miraculously straightened itself out."

Tony pulled her close in the middle of the path. "Kate, get this through you head. You're going nowhere without me until we find what I'm looking for. And as long as we're going to stand here like two lovers, I might as well take full advantage of it." His lips descended on hers, hard and warm, as though he wanted to grind away any further objections she might have.

Kate, feeling a tempting surge of electricity glow through her body, pulled quickly away. "You have more nerve than anybody I know," she muttered.

Tony tucked his arm through hers. "That bad?"

"No, damn it, you're that good." She felt suddenly like laughing or crying, but was not certain which. "Tony, you seem to be wonderful—but so what? You're cramping my style. You've been trouble from the moment we met."

"I believe," Tony said in a mock hurt manner, "that I've behaved in an exemplary way, despite the temptations you've thrown in my path."

"Tony, I'm trying to get out of your path."

"But you're willing to accept a favor from the famous Peter Kendall. Or do you believe that whatever thanks he might expect won't be too difficult for you to give?"

Kate felt her face grow warm. Certainly she must have known Peter would not do her a favor just for the sake of it. Perhaps Tony had caught something she was even hiding from herself. Men like Peter had always appealed to her—for all the wrong reasons. She had seen at once that he was moody and self-centered.

Before she could respond, Tony said, "I'll go my old brother up one or two. You're in desperate straits, Ms. Manning. You need *truffles*, and pronto."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know a Rumanian baker on a tiny side street in Queens who is noted for his chocolate candies, to say nothing of his strudel. His truffles may not be just like yours, but it's Christmas, and I doubt anyone will notice."

Kate's face glowed. It struck Tony that this was the first time in a long, jaded existence that he had looked into eyes that held such wonder.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Rumanian truffles? What were you doing on a side street in Queens, anyway?"

He put his arm around her waist and grinned at her. "Next to that Rumanian bakery is a parts supply shop where I buy the things that make my inventions go round. And I defy you to make a better truffle than my friend Ricki Constanti."

THE V & R BAKERY had been decorated for Christmas, with a small Santa Claus on the counter and tinsel draped across the back shelves. There was a small table and four wrought-iron chairs near a glass cabinet in which delicate, cream-filled cakes were displayed.

Kate saw the truffles at once, in the front case among a batch of marzipan shapes. They seemed perfect copies of her own.

"Try one, and then make a judgment," said Tony. "Ricki won't broadcast your secret."

"Oh, nuts," she said, glaring at the saleslady, who had turned from her customer to greet them.

"Ah, Mr. Kendall," the woman said. "How are you?"

"Great. Enough snow for you? Mrs. Constanti, my friend here wants to meet your husband."

She smiled at Kate, her eyes wide with curiosity. "I'll get him."

"Be nice to the nice baker," Tony whispered.

Ricki was a tall gentleman with black hair and a ruddy, handsome face. He gave Tony a surprised smile. "Got that invention for me yet?"

"Have patience, my friend," Tony said, "I'm working on it. Today, I've something better for you. A customer who'd like to taste your famed *truffles*. This is Kate Manning, and she's a bit of an expert on truffles."

The baker shook her hand.

"Not really an authority," Kate said. "My aunt Willa." She gave a little shrug.

"Indeed? Rumanian, your aunt Willa?"

"Second generation."

The baker solemnly pulled out one of the candies and handed it to her. "You, too?" he asked Tony.

"Me, too."

Kate took a small bite and closed her eyes.

Another customer came in. There was a long conversation in Rumanian, followed by the purchase of several cakes.

"Well?" Tony asked Kate.

"Perfect." Her answer was clipped. She did not want to talk about it.

Mrs. Constanti, as though on cue, appeared with a tray bearing two small cups of coffee and two rounded chocolate pastries. "Compliments of the Constantis." She went back behind the counter.

The baker came over to their table and pulled up a chair. "What's the verdict?" he asked Kate.

"Incredible," she said. "I need about twenty-four dozen of them, by Tuesday." She stopped as the baker's jaw dropped.

"Vera!" he bawled suddenly, and his wife ran over, looking worried. "Vera, can you imagine, twenty-four dozen *truffles* by Tuesday?"

Mrs. Constanti looked from her husband to Tony, to Kate. "What time on Tuesday?"

ON THE DRIVE back into Manhattan, something clicked in Kate's mind.

Her answering machine. That was the annoying tick she had tried to ignore all day. "We've been pretty dumb. If anyone found the black box, you know who they would call?"

"You," Tony said. "And you have an answering machine." He

spotted a telephone booth and pulled over. "Got a quarter?"

They were rewarded with a busy signal.

"Come on, let's go," Tony said. "If you did get that message, and it was picked up, those birds are well ahead of us." And they would have the device and send it on its way, he thought, remembering Mickey's pleased insistence that nothing would go wrong.

"Your little invention is as safe as the vault at the Federal Reserve Building," Mickey had said.

"I could probably break into that in ten minutes flat," Tony had responded coldly.

KATE SURVEYED the wreckage of the studio and came to the conclusion that no one had come back in.

"Where's the answering machine?"

"Where they put it. How do I know where it is?" Kate set about clearing things up.

"Here it is, still plugged in," Tony said, retrieving it from under a pile of books. "And the message light is on."

There were two calls made in succession, but neither caller had spoken a word.

"There are always a couple of those," she said.

Her agent had phoned. "Kate, there's a general chorus call on Monday at the Barrymore Theatre. Carl Dietz. But those calls are strictly for publicity. He's seeing a chosen few on Tuesday, but I'm not sure I can do anything. Call me on Monday."

"And pay later," Kate remarked. "He never does anything for me. Thank goodness for your brother."

Then there was Bonnie Neel's voice. "Hello, this is Bonnie Neel, you know, the person whose apartment you borrowed? Where the devil are you?"

And at last, the call they had been waiting for. It was a young man's voice, sounding confused. "I'm calling for the Candy Emporium, Third Avenue. It's about some chocolates you delivered. Could you call my mother up in Connecticut? She brought a carton there with her." Then he gave the number.

"That's it," Tony said. "What's her name?"

"Amy Taylor. She has a weekend house in Connecticut. Stamford, I'm pretty sure."

Tony was busy dialing when Kate went into the kitchen. She desperately wanted a cup of coffee.

Tony counted ten rings and then slammed the phone down. "Try the Candy Emporium."

"You tried it at lunch," she said. "It's closed."

"Call it again," he told her.

"Following which, you're going to do me a little favor and call your brother."

"There's no answer," she said at last.

"Where in Stamford does she live?" Tony asked.

"How should I know?" She heard the kettle whistle and went to make the coffee, but Tony was there before her, turning the flame off.

"Her name is Amy Taylor?"

"That's what I know her as."

"Married? Divorced?"

"Widowed, I think." Amy was middle-aged, with a son and a young daughter both attending private schools in the city. She operated the Candy Emporium as a hobby. "Tony, finding her will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Relax for a while and we'll try her again."

The kitchen scarcely held the two of them, and Kate had to reach around him for the kettle. "Come on, soldier, you're in the way."

He took her by the shoulders. "Kate, I like the picture you make of domesticity amid chaos, but we've got to get the hell out of here. We'll keep calling her on our way up to Stamford. By the time we get there, we should make contact. If not, we'll go to the police station and locate her that way. I also have an ace in the hole if things begin to look difficult." Mickey, of course, but Tony was afraid of letting the CIA man take charge.

Kate suddenly drooped her head against his chest, wanting his arms around her, and the chaos to go away.

"Poor Kate," he said tenderly, rubbing her back and brushing his lips against her hair. "Got you chasing to hell and gone, and all you want is a cup of coffee and a part of the new musical. So I'll make that phone call to my brother."

"Does he keep his promises?"

Tony resisted the temptation to kiss her. "Pretty Kate," he said, "you're one promise he'll remember."

They stood still for a few moments, Kate burrowed into his arms, her head against his chest.

"Okay, call him and then let's go," she said.

But Peter was not in. Tony left a message that Kate was waiting to hear from him. "We may have to stay overnight in Connecticut," Tony said. "That's where my invention is, and we'll collect it as soon as we find Amy Taylor."

UNDER A MOONLIT sky, the car sped north on the snow-cleared Connecticut Turnpike.

"How long have I been asleep?" Kate asked, yawning.

"Catnap. Fifteen, twenty minutes, no more."

Kate sat up straight, stretched and looked out the side window. There were few cars on the turnpike, so when she checked the side mirror and saw headlights behind them, she wondered whether someone was following them.

"Incidentally," Tony said, "I called Pete when we stopped at my apartment for my toothbrush and money. He was home. You're all set for Tuesday morning at nine."

"Oh, wonderful. That's great news." She clasped her hands in delight. "You phoned him just like that. I didn't know."

"That's what you get for not coming into my bedroom. If I remember, I extended an invitation to tour the finer points of my establishment."

"I'm in enough trouble already without playing house with you." She glanced at him, smiling.

Tony fished out some change as they approached the tolls. "Pete is having one of his famous bashes tomorrow night. He wanted me to bring you. I told him no."

"Tony!" Kate was dismayed. "What kind of party?"

"You won't like it. For a man who is considered the premier interpreter of Mozart, he has too many spurious acquaintances."

"I'd still like to go," she said. "Why did you refuse for me? Christmas in New York and a party at Peter Kendall's. That's plain glamorous to a little girl from Cleveland. And who knows what important contact I could make there?"

"Curious, your desperate need to make contacts," he observed disapprovingly.

She ignored his remark. "I really want to go. If you won't take me, I'll just show up myself."

"Baby, you won't be out of my sight for one minute for the next twenty-four hours. You're not going, with or without me." He wondered why he had brought the subject up. Perhaps he'd wanted to provoke a fight about his brother, or perhaps it was that he felt Kate should know about the invitation—and his feelings about it.

He flipped the coins into the toll booth basket, then stepped on the gas.

They were silent for a while.

"At the risk of sounding paranoid," Kate asked, "is it possible we're being followed?"

"Possible," he said casually.

"You mean you know we are. Can you see who's driving?"

"Only that there are two of them, men. They've been tailing us for the last twenty minutes. Seat belt fastened?" Without waiting for an answer, he swerved suddenly to the right and took a narrow incline to the service road. Kate grabbed the door

handle as the car that had been following them whizzed past.

"Did it?"

Once on the highway, Tony pointed to the vehicle ahead. "No way they can get behind us again. They must be boiling."

"Thank the Lord for little favors," Kate said. "Do you suppose they know it's us behind them?"

"Doubt it. They're heading for the next exit, hoping to pick us up somehow. And Stamford is the exit after that."

Not far beyond their exit, they saw a phone booth. Kate dialed Amy Taylor's number, allowing it to ring a dozen times. "It's no use," she said. "Nobody home."

"Damn!" Tony slammed his fist against the glass door. "Try again. You raced through those numbers."

She sighed, and dialed again, this time holding the receiver to his ear. "Satisfied?" she said, hanging up.

"Call the operator and get her address."

"They don't give addresses."

"Do it."

The operator informed Kate that Amy Taylor had an unlisted number.

"And that's that," Kate said, "or do you have any other bright ideas?"

They pushed through the heavy snow to the car. "We've got a lot of thinking to do."

"Smart move," she said. "Coming up here without a clue as to where Amy lives."

"Don't talk. Give me time to think."

At the car door he said, "We're going to chance it. She's our only clue so far, and I'm just going to gamble on her coming home soon."

"Which means?" Kate asked, scrambling in.

Tony bent toward her, and before she could move, he was pulling her close. His mouth came down hard, but when at last he let her go, his voice was soft. "I think I owe you a nice, expensive dinner, a bottle of imported wine and a soft bed, with or without me in it." He had worked his hand under her coat and was slowly massaging her back in light, sensuous circles. Kate closed her eyes and leaned into him. This time his kiss was lazy and tender. He opened her mouth with his tongue, and his hand, now under her clothing, touched her flesh lightly. She jerked quickly away from him. Tony said, "Believe it or not, my intentions are honorable."

She wondered if he could hear the thundering of her heart. "Honorable intentions. I heard that once from a casting director with a well-worn couch, and I believed him the same way I believe you. I didn't get the part."

He gave a quick laugh and sat back behind the wheel. "Trusting Kate."

"Where are we off to? I can't wait for the next thrilling chapter of *Kate and Tony in Connecticut*." She felt less confident than she sounded.

"A four-star restaurant not far from here. It rivals anything in the Big Apple, to say nothing of its rooms filled with antique furniture."

He turned down a road that narrowed to a single lane recently cleared of snow and dusted with gravel. Old-fashioned gas lanterns on either side led to the circular driveway of a sprawling, white clapboard

mansion, its windows alight around large, indoor Christmas wreaths. A black-lettered sign announced it as The Elms.

"Tony, how fabulous!" She turned to him with a delighted smile. "Did you make this place up?"

"Stick with me, kid. I'll make all your wishes come true."

The inner center hall was dominated by a huge, softly lit Christmas tree, the circular staircase at the far end decked out with red ribbons and wreaths. Kate was surprised to find the place bustling with people, many chatting amiably as they waited to be seated for dinner.

Tony went over to the registration desk, where he was greeted effusively by a tall, dark-haired woman.

He probably brings women here all the time, Kate fumed inwardly. *If he tells me they have only one room left...* She let the thought drop away as he approached her.

"We're in luck. They have two adjoining rooms left," he said with a broad smile. "Come on, I told Lottie we'd be ready for dinner in a half hour."

HER ROOM was large, with a stained-glass window, delicate wallpaper and a four-poster with a ruffled canopy. An oversize rocking chair with an afghan draped over its arm faced the fireplace.

Tony, opening the door from his room, stood watching her. "I told you I'd see you had a Merry Christmas, sooner if not later."

"It's the most beautiful room I've ever been in," Kate said, running over to hug him.

His arm tightened about her, but she pulled away. "Mrs. Amy Tay-

lor, remember? The reason we're here." She went over to the phone.

Another dozen rings went unanswered.

"I'm not beginning to regret it," Tony said, bending over to kiss her lightly on the lips. "Soon," he whispered.

Kate wondered if her face mirrored the indecision she felt. "Tony..." she began.

"Quiet. We're going to change and grab a bite to eat. We'll give the elusive Mrs. Taylor another hour or so before we call the troops."

"The troops? You mean the police?"

"No—a metaphor for my ace in the hole, remember?"

"Call him now."

Tony shook his head. He'd call Mickey only if all else failed. "Execute all. Fifteen minutes, pardner."

BACK IN Kate's room after dinner, they made the next call to Amy Taylor. On the third ring, her son came on the line. "Miss Manning? Didn't the guy give you the address?"

"What guy?" Kate managed, her throat going dry.

"He called about ten minutes ago. Said he was calling for you and wanted to know where my mother was."

"I see, and did you tell him?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Kate took a deep breath. "Okay," she said. "We just haven't made contact. Suppose you tell me where she is, and if anyone else calls, don't say anything, you hear?"

The kid hesitated. "Did I do something wrong?"

"It's okay. Your mother never did tell you why she called about the candy, did she?"

"No. She's at this party in Darien."

Tony handed her a notebook and pencil. "Oh," Kate said, "give me your address in Stamford as well, just in case I miss her."

When she hung up, Tony said, "How the hell could they have gotten that phone number?"

"Their government connections are better than your government connections."

"Get your coat," he said. "They must have picked up the call on your machine and known you'd hightail it up here. You were their insurance if Taylor refused to talk to them. Remember, she was waiting to hear from you. When we lost them on the turnpike, they knew they had to act, and luckily for them, they got her son. Let's go." He raced into his room and grabbed his coat.

THE PARTY was in full swing when they pulled up to a three-story brick building, its lights blazing. They could hear the loud rumble of rock music. The front door suddenly opened on a group of people, laughing and talking. Kate and Tony walked quickly past them into the house.

"Try to look as if we're passing through on our way to another party," Tony whispered. "Let's not even take our coats off."

Kate looked quickly around, trying to spot Amy Taylor. "I don't see her. She's kind of big and plump, with bright yellow hair. You can't miss her."

They separated at the door to the den. Kate approached a group of men arguing about politics. "Amy Taylor said she'd meet me right here," she began, "but I'm late. She didn't leave a message, did she?"

"Amy Taylor?" The men looked at one another.

"She was here a while ago," one of them said. "Why don't you take your coat off and make yourself at home? Since the bar is here, everyone drifts in sooner or later. Can I get you anything?"

Kate shook her head. "Thanks, you're very kind." She left the den and saw Tony across the room, talking earnestly to a woman in a low-cut black dress.

"That's *not* Amy Taylor," Kate muttered to herself, but then he was at her side.

"Who was your friend?" she asked him.

"Just a one-moment stand, but she did say that Amy came here loaded down with red boxes, so we're on the right track."

"When was she here?"

"About an hour ago. She headed for the kitchen."

"What are we waiting for?"

The large kitchen was empty except for a woman in a long hostess gown, arguing with another in a white apron.

"Excuse me," Kate said. "I'm looking for Amy Taylor."

"You, too?" The hostess frowned, her tone angry and distracted. "That man walked right in here and began pulling everything apart. Do you know what these cost?"

"What man?" For the first time Kate realized that the kitchen table

was filled with open boxes of her truffles, and that someone had torn through them, strewing the candy about. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said.

"I thought he came with the Cunninghamams, and then he asked for Amy Taylor. I told him she had left, and he made a beeline for the kitchen table. Said Amy told him she brought the truffles here and they were the wrong order."

"When was he here?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes ago."

"Did he wear a beard?" Kate asked. "Was he alone?"

"He was alone and quite ordinary-looking, slim, medium height, wore a hat, pale, no beard. Old, young, I don't know; middle-aged, maybe."

"Amy brought all those boxes here," Kate stated.

"That," the woman said, "is because I ordered them, but if she thinks she's going to receive one penny... And then she left me two pounds short." She looked at Kate as if finally seeing her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Kate Manning, a friend of Amy Taylor's." Kate put out her hand. "Thanks very much, Mrs...."

"What was that man looking for?" her hostess asked.

"Whatever it was, he didn't find it," Kate said.

"Do you know where Mrs. Taylor was going when she left here?" Tony inquired.

"Don't know or care." The woman turned away. Kate and Tony went quickly back to the car.

"Where to—Stamford?" asked Kate.

"That's where our mysterious friend is going."

"He has fifteen or twenty minutes on us."

"We're phoning the Taylor residence first."

"Two boxes are unaccounted for. Does that mean anything?"

"Nothing at all. Remember, the black box is in a carton all by itself, but our man doesn't know that, since he looked through each and every box. But with two of the pound boxes missing, he believes Amy Taylor might still have the invention. Am I making myself clear?"

Kate nodded. Tony put the key in the ignition, then went on. "Now, Emil can be counted out, since he knows the prize is in the carton."

"If not Emil, who? The two loves lies at Shay's place?"

"The description doesn't fit. Otherwise—" Tony stopped, suddenly afraid of what he was thinking. It had to be. Mickey, the anonymous civil servant, who could be any age and look like anyone. Tony decided that Mickey had slipped up by not asking to see the invention. "The man in the bakeshop will steal it," Mickey had said. He was interested in results, not technicalities.

"There's a gas station," Tony told Kate. "You make the phone call, and I'll fill up."

*

KATE HUNG UP the phone and ran over to Tony.

"Is she back?" he asked.

"Yes, but they're going to New York now. I told them to sit tight until we got there. I'm a little worried about how the kid sounded."

Tony raced around to the driver's seat. "Let's go. And let's hope they have sense enough to stay put."

The lights were still blazing in the lower windows of the small mock-Colonial farmhouse and there was one car parked in front.

Amy Taylor answered the door. She was wearing a knit cap, blue ski jacket and slacks. "We'll never get back to town at this rate."

They stepped into a brightly lit hall.

"What's this all about, Kate?" Amy asked.

"Amy, you called me, remember?"

The woman's face brightened. "Oh, yes! Be a darling and see if you can't get another carton to me tomorrow."

"Is that what you called me about?" Kate asked.

"Why else would I call you? Jonathan," Amy Taylor suddenly shouted, "get a move on."

"You're completely out of chocolate truffles, is that it?" Kate asked Amy.

"Including the two pounds that odd chap bought at the door a while ago. Jonathan answered the door. The man said he was from my Darien customer and that I owed her two boxes of chocolates."

"What did he look like?" Kate asked.

"Jonathan!"

But the teenager who slouched resentfully into the room was of no help, either. His description matched that of the Darien hostess.

"What about the truffles?" Amy Taylor called as Tony and Kate hurried off.

"Wednesday soonest," Kate called back.

Tony drove away slowly. "I'm going to follow her out to the turn-

pike," he told Kate, "just to make certain our mysterious friend is not around." He was certain that Amy was off the hook, but a little caution never hurt. Staying overnight at The Elms was the safest move he could make. It was not Amy Taylor who was in danger. It was Kate.

THE ROOM at The Elms was dark. Tony had closed his eyes, but sleep would not come. Damn her, he thought, it was not supposed to be like this. She was not supposed to be adorable and marvelous to be with. He could almost hear her in the silence, not a dozen feet away, beyond the closed door. She was awake, or so he assumed from the reed of light that bordered the door.

If there was a wedge of doubt in his mind at that moment, he pushed it aside, then reached for his jeans and shirt. He tapped softly at the door, wondering what he would do if she turned him away.

He heard her soft rustling inside. He was leaning casually against the frame, grinning a grin he hoped was not sheepish, when she opened the door. The muted light cast a delicate web of color over her face and hair. She gave him a half smile of surprise, as though she guessed why he was there.

Her nightgown was of a creamy fabric that clung to her body beneath her robe, her breasts rising and falling with what he assumed was an effort to control her emotions. Tony relaxed a bit.

"I'm about to offer you the deal of a lifetime, lady," he said. "For a small down payment, you can take complete possession of one Anthony Kendall for the night."

Kate let out a small gasp and shook her head.

"Or barring that," he went on, "I will be more than happy to give you a free sample."

"You character!" She stepped back, away from the door. Their eyes held, and Kate watched his look soften as she drew in her breath.

"We stand fully behind our product," he said, his arms aching to hold her. He moved quickly past her to the window, not giving her time to reconsider.

"Tony, you're crazy." She pulled the robe close, shivering slightly, watching him.

He turned around and faced her. She was still standing at the door. "I think I am crazy, Kate. About you." He kept his voice low. "I thought you were simply along for the ride, the famous little list in the form of a beautiful face and body, a bit of extra freight on the train that was taking me to my invention. As soon as we stopped, you'd get off, but Katie..."

"Tony, I..."

He would not let her continue. "Tell me a bedtime story, Kate," he whispered across the space that separated them. "And give it a happy ending."

"It's too complicated, Tony." She shook her head, and when he came toward her, she took a step back. Her eyes were wide, but she did not move when he took her in his arms. The robe slipped from her shoulders as he brushed his lips over hers. He felt her draw away and whispered, "It's too late, Katie. There's no turning back now."

She held her hands against his chest. "I had a premonition about

fate intervening wickedly when I saw you at the cabaret. I should have run."

"Shh," he said softly, "you'll break the spell."

Gently he prodded her mouth open, and her soft, moist tongue touched his. She moaned, but the protest was pushed back by the force of his kiss.

"Forget everything but us, that's all that's important," he said at last.

"Us and now," she whispered back. Tony could feel her confusion, but he knew that she had waited, just as he had, and wanted.

"Complications," she whispered, and the word hung in the air between them.

He drew her close, her head against his chest, and buried his face in her hair.

"I'm cold," she said simply. "I haven't been able to warm up since this whole thing began." Her breath caught in her throat as he held her tight and rained kisses along her neck and down her shoulders.

"Kate." A floodtide of desire overtook him. He could wait no longer. "I'll keep you warm."

He lifted her swiftly, carrying her to the bed with his lips against hers. She gripped his shoulders as he pushed the blanket aside.

"Keep me warm," she echoed, sensations flooding through her that she could give no name to. She had been down this path before, letting her heart rule her head. Yet she reached out for him, running her hands down his back, seeking his warmth and strength. As his hands moved along her body, touching, caressing, she felt the warm tingle of passion begin to build. It rushed

swiftly through her, yet it was the slow smile he gave her that sealed the moment. He put his mouth on hers, moving against her, and she was consumed by the heat that connected them.

A feeling of breathlessness gripped her; a moan, low and full of surrender, began deep inside her. He was over her, pressing his weight into her. She wrapped herself around him, drawing him in. The feel and taste of him filled her mind and the only sound was of their bodies moving together, blocking out the world and all its terror.

SOMETHING WAS there. What was it? Something threatening. The room was dead silent and pitch-black when Kate opened her eyes. Tony's arms were still tight about her, and she was afraid to move, afraid to jar him awake. Someone was in the room, or close by, but she had nothing to guide her except the thread of light at the door to the corridor.

Then she heard it again and the sliver of light beneath the door darkened. Someone was standing there, and then the doorknob turned, jangling the keys, but the door did not give.

"Who's there?" she called out. The shadow moved, and everything was silent again.

"What?" It was Tony, still half in his dreams, gathering her closer. "Kate."

She lay for a long time with her eyes wide open, knowing that sleep would not come easily again.

TONY DID NOT know if it was the sun streaming into the room or the dull ache in his arm that finally woke

him. Kate was curled next to him, her head against his chest, her arm flung across him. As he looked down at her, he knew that if he did not move now, he would give in to the desire he felt building. But while he was putting on his shirt, she spoke up suddenly.

"Tony, someone tried to get at us last night."

"What are you talking about?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Something woke me up. There was someone out there. I think they tried the doorknob. I called out, and the shadow faded away."

"And you didn't bother telling me."

"I thought you'd wake up when I called, but you didn't."

"Next time," he said, "punch me in the ribs."

"Tony, there won't be a next time."

"Katie," he began, but did not finish. Instead he took her in his arms. "What we had last night—"

"What we had," she said, "was a lovely Christmas plum pudding, and champagne, and all the presents we ever wanted, and some, I think, we never even imagined." It had all happened too soon, and she could not read too much into it. She had wanted him last night with the same urgency he had shown, but that could have been a reaction to the combination of time, place and a magic that she might only have imagined. But it had felt so good. She put her lips to his for a soft, brief kiss. Then she pushed him away. "And now we have work to do. First stop, Dandy's Candies on West Eighty-sixth Street."

"Katie," he murmured, "you're a wonder."

THEIR NOTES were spread out on Kate's studio couch, caught in the light of a late-afternoon sun.

"Six shops absolutely squeaky clean," she was summarizing for Tony. "Add them to Amy, Bloomie's and Zabar's, and we're up to nine candy shops that do *not* have the black box. That leaves The Sweetery down here in the Village," she said. "They know I delivered a single carton of truffles, but it seems someone made off with it."

"A thief with a sweet tooth."

"They don't remember if it had a gold ribbon."

"What our friends are doing," Tony said, "is covering every store in town that could conceivably buy your chocolates."

"So The Sweetery is a maybe."

"I'm afraid it's more than that."

"Dandy's Candies. Two cartons bought, neither with a gold ribbon, Dandy says, but he's a bit flaky. One carton went to Greece yesterday with his brother." Kate looked up to find Tony watching her with a whimsical smile on his face. "Maybe you'd like a trip to Greece," she added.

"With you, right after the transmitter is found."

"Dandy opened the second carton and had already sold a box this morning. That lets out carton number two."

"Next," Tony prompted.

"The last and perhaps the most worrisome. Ice-Cream Haven."

"The owner said two cartons open and contents put in the cooler," Tony said. "One whole carton bought as is by one Peter Kendall for

his party tonight, *sweet* coincidence, and easily checked out by going to said party, as you wanted to do all along."

Kate smiled triumphantly because she had won on that point alone. She wondered whether Peter had bought the truffles just to please her. She had told him Ice-Cream Haven sold them because it was around the corner from where he lived.

"We've accounted for all the cartons but two, the stolen carton and the last one they told us about at Ice-Cream Haven. The one charged to Sebastian Wellen, International Estates, Inc., on Park Avenue."

Tony dialed the company's number and asked for Wellen while Kate went into the kitchen to wash a few dishes, listening to the silence in the studio. When it lasted too long, she went to the kitchen door.

"Strikeout," Tony said, replacing the receiver. "There is no Sebastian Wellen at International Estates."

"So now we have *two* stolen cartons and one possibility in Greece. Plus Peter, who is just too weird a coincidence."

"Damn!" Tony smacked his fist against the wall. "Look, you might get a call from whoever stole the carton from The Sweetery. *If* all he or she wanted was some Christmas chocolates for dear old mum. But if the other side picked it up, it's on its way overseas—maybe. At any rate, you're out of danger, as far as the KGB is concerned. They have the black box through either the stolen carton or Sebastian Wellen."

"Unless it was stolen at The Sweetery, and whoever stole it holds it up for ransom. If the KGB is at the same point we are, they know one

thing more than we do: that they did *not* steal the carton. I'm still in danger, Tony."

He gathered her in his arms, holding her close, his lips against her hair. "Kate, I'll make it all up to you when this whole thing is over."

AS THEY approached the door to his brother's apartment, Tony told himself that no good would come of the evening. Peter would make his usual fuss over Tony's girl, and he, Tony, would fume.

The door was opened by the valet, looking weary.

"Started early, has it?" Tony asked, as he helped Kate out of her coat.

"And ending late, I suppose," the valet said.

They made their way through the crowded foyer into the equally crowded living room. A small space had been cleared in the center of the huge room and several couples were dancing to music being played by a three-piece band. Another musician sat at the piano.

"Tony, old darling!" Elyse Sebring, wearing a red satin gown with huge bow sleeves, materialized out of the crowd and rushed toward them. Her eyes slid past Tony to take in Kate and her wide-skirted filmy white dress. In that look, Kate read envy and when Elyse gave her a thin, cold smile, she understood at last. Elyse did not care for Peter; she was in love with Tony.

Seeing her corral Tony into a conversation with another man, Kate moved away, feeling like a stranger to all the noise and music and laughter. Then an arm went about her waist, and a soft kiss was placed

on her neck. "I've been looking for you." Peter, smiling, took her in his arms and began to dance with her. "That's what I like about crowds," he said, "I don't have any choice but to get very close to you."

Kate laughed, but she did not want him pressing his body against hers. "Maybe too close."

"No way. Like new-wave music?"

"I thought all I'd be hearing would be old-wave—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms. What happened?"

"This should teach you not to expect the expected from me."

"Oh, by the way," she said, giving Peter a dazzling smile, "I've been meaning to thank you."

"Thank away. I've no idea for what, but do."

"For setting up the Carl Dietz date."

"Nothing to it. He's my poker buddy. You didn't come here just to thank me, did you?" he asked. "I was hoping you came to see me."

"That, too." He was flirting with her, and she wondered why he would take her on, Tony's date, without knowing for certain what their relationship was. Perhaps it was a game they played, with their women as pawns. The idea was not appealing.

"Oh, and there's another thank-you," she said breathlessly, knowing that he was holding her entirely too close. "For buying a whole carton of my chocolates just like that. Twelve pounds!"

He looked down at her quizzically. "Who squealed? It was supposed to be a surprise, my young Kate. Can't a man keep anything to himself?"

Kate faltered in her step, smiling to hide her mistake. "I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I went back into the kitchen for a glass of water. There it was, a complete carton of Kate's Chocolate Clouds. Have you tasted them yet?"

"Rule of the establishment," he remarked. "The valet gets the first taste."

"You're kidding."

He held her for a while, scarcely moving to the music. "I'm kidding. I took the first taste, since I can't occupy the same space as a box of chocolates for long. You're pretty good, Katie. Make them yourself?"

"That," she said, "is a family secret." Now there were just the thief and Wellen to worry about.

She glanced about for Tony and saw him at the door leading to the kitchen. At that moment Peter lifted two glasses of champagne from a waiter's tray, handing one to her.

"Let's sit the next one out," he suggested. "I know a place where the music is mellower and the noise a little more kindly. Why don't we hightail it out of here and get to know each other better?"

"I came with Tony," Kate said, frowning. "Besides, wouldn't your guests miss you if you disappeared like that?"

"No more than I'd miss them if they disappeared just like that." He laughed, a low, infectious sound.

"I take it this is a gathering of a few hundred of your closest friends, then."

"How did you meet Tony?" he asked suddenly.

"We bumped into each other at the local bakery."

"Your basic pickup? I always knew my brother had good taste."

"I think he was after my truffle recipe."

"I doubt it," Peter said. "Come on, let's split."

Kate looked across the room and saw Tony heading into the hall. He was going after the chocolates, she told herself, and she could save him the trouble. "I'll be back in just a second," she told Peter. "And then we can discuss your offer in greater detail." She hurried after Tony.

TONY PICKED UP the telephone in his brother's bedroom and dialed Mickey. A quick glance in the kitchen had told him all he wanted to know about the chocolates.

"Mickey?"

"You've taken your damn time," he growled in reply.

"That's right. I've been playing hopscotch all over New York and Connecticut with what I suspect are a couple of your boys."

"What are you talking about, Tony? What men?"

The music had stopped, but Tony could hear laughter and voices.

"Play it cool, if that's what you want," he said. "Right now I need your help. We've gone through most of the list and come up with nothing," Tony said tiredly. "What bothers me is that if Sebastian Wellen isn't one of yours, he's one of theirs. If he doesn't have my invention, he'll be coming back at us."

"I've never heard of him, Tony."

"I'll get back to him in a minute. I want to talk about Kate Manning now. I'm going to park her someplace safe. She's no use to us any-

more, and keeping her around is beginning to slow me down."

"The only safe place is with us," Mickey said. "We'll keep her on ice for you."

Tony laughed. "No way. You'll have to trust me, Mickey, at least as much as I trust you. That should keep us both on our toes."

"If I were on my toes any more, I'd qualify for the Russian ballet."

Cagey, Tony thought. He was beginning to wonder whose side anybody was on. "I need your help, Mickey. Somebody may or may not be three steps ahead of us. I suspect it's not all on their side, either. I see your fine hand in it somewhere."

"Get to the point," the CIA man snapped. "You've been making time with a chorus girl and calling it work. I'm putting the word out to haul her in. We'll keep her on ice or use her as bait, whichever suits us, and that's the final word, friend."

"Damn it, Mickey, don't threaten me, and don't put any more tails on me. All I want you and your bloodhounds to do is find someone called Sebastian Wellen. I don't have the facilities for a long search, and you do. As for the rest, leave it to me."

Mickey sighed. "Okay, have it your way for the next twenty-four hours. Where can I get in touch with you?"

"I'll call you. And keep your men off. I said Kate Manning is mine, and where she is and what she does will all be mapped out by me."

"Man, she must be something," Mickey laughed and hung up.

Tony replaced the receiver. He was enraged by the thought of Mickey taking her over, believing she knew something when she did not. Tony

would blow the whole operation before he would allow that to happen. He'd have his Kate, he told himself, and eat her truffles, too. He would find her and haul her out of there.

KATE LEANED BACK against the wall next to the open bedroom door, letting the fear and anger overtake her. She had done it again. Alice in wonderful Wonderland. She moved away, the words she had heard Tony say echoing in her brain. *She's no use to us anymore. I'm going to park her someplace safe.*

Kate had to get out of there. Without thinking clearly about it, she went quickly back into the living room and found Peter. "I'm going home," she said.

"Lovers' quarrel?" He looked interested.

"Oh, not exactly. Not really, but..."

"I'll handle it," Peter said. "And if he asks?"

"I just disappeared." Let him worry, she told herself. Let him get frantic.

*

DOOR LOCKED behind her. Safe at last. Kate, leaning back against the door in imitation of all the heroines in all the suspense movies she had ever seen, breathed a sigh of relief. Her apartment did not seem to have entertained an unexpected visitor since she had left it earlier with Tony.

When the telephone rang, she stopped short of picking it up. The caller might be Tony, and Kate wanted him to worry. When the answering machine kicked in, she turned and went deliberately into her

bathroom, where she stripped and stepped into the shower.

Later, wrapped in a terry-cloth robe, she approached the machine. Again her telephone began to ring. "Damn." She picked it up. "Hello?"

The accent was unmistakable. "Is that you, chérie? It's Emil. Emil Laurent." He sounded harried, his voice a whisper. "Kate, did he come to see you about... the carton with the gold bow?"

"He? I'm afraid you'll have to make yourself clearer, Emil. Why did you disappear from your shop and take all my cartons with you? I need them. You left me high and dry, and I won't forgive you for that."

"I didn't take them," he cried. "They came for me. They moved everything out as if I didn't exist. My customers, twenty-five years, just like that. They said nothing. They just took me away... only I escaped. You would think that was what those fools wanted." He took a breath. "Kate, are you listening?"

"Where are you?" she asked. "Who is this *they*?"

"The CIA, the FBI, Tony Kendall. I don't know who. Quick, you have to tell me. I made a carton with a gold bow, one of yours. You took it with you on Saturday, do you remember?"

"Yes, but I've no idea where it is. Where are you? Can I get help to you?" She heard a faint groan. "Emil?" She waited a moment, listening to the broken connection. Then she let out a sigh.

Tony had known all along where Emil was, if she could believe Emil. One thing was certain, Tony was not setting the world on fire to get to her.

And in spite of what he had told his telephone contact, Mickey, he had not been protecting her at all. She had, indeed, outlived her usefulness.

Kate was ahead in just one way. She had heard his telephone conversation, but he did not know that.

There were several messages on her answering machine, including one from her mother in Cleveland and a few from friends who wanted to spread some Christmas cheer.

The last message was the strangest of all, from a woman with a gravelly voice. "Say, listen, Kate's Chocolate Clouds, I want my money back. What is this thing, a computer? As far as I can tell, it doesn't do a damn thing. Some kind of kid's Christmas toy? Call me here at—no, never mind, you won't. I'll call you at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow. Remember, my money back. There are laws in this state." A click, and she had hung up.

"Blast!" Kate said aloud. "I have that tryout tomorrow morning and I'm not going to miss it. Tony will just have to—" She stopped. No, not Tony, never Tony. She would work it out for herself. The best thing would be to leave a message on the machine, asking the woman to call again at a specific time. Maybe 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. But then, there were the chocolates out in Queens, and no carmine cartons.

Kate found herself smiling involuntarily, Tony to the rescue with the V & R Bakery. What a wonder he was when he wanted to be. The heel! She would never tell Tony about the message on the machine, or that the black box was with a hoarse-voiced

lady who only wanted her ill-gotten money back.

As a matter of fact, Kate was not even certain that she was willing to put out nearly one hundred dollars to ransom back those stolen goods.

She yawned suddenly. It was past midnight, and tomorrow was going to be a long day.

THE DOOR to the rehearsal studio on Broadway was of frosted glass with only the room number on it. After a moment's hesitation, Kate pushed it to. Inside, the huge, high-ceilinged loft space was empty, except for the half-dozen people sitting around a wooden table. A piano stood in a corner.

"Mr. Dietz?" She took a step forward, recognizing the silver-haired director.

"Yes?" He had a sheaf of papers in front of him, a container of coffee at his elbow.

"I'm Kate Manning."

Dietz glanced at his watch, although it was clearly a reflex action. Kate was right on time.

"Pete's friend," he said with a smile.

Oh, Lord, she thought, Pete's friend. He's not going to give me the time of day.

"You can change in there." He pointed to a door. "Did you bring some music?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Cole Porter. "I Get a Kick out of You," she said.

"Sandy here is going to play for you," Dietz said, nodding to a pale-haired young man with a beard.

When she stepped out of the dressing room five minutes later, three other women had arrived.

Oh, Lord, Kate said once again to herself. I don't really want this anymore, do I?

Sandy went over to the piano. "Ready?"

Kate cleared her throat. Her heart pounded, as usual. For a moment, she was certain she had forgotten the words to the song.

Then everything clicked into place, as she somehow thought it would. Five minutes, that was all, and the audition was over.

"Thank you," Dietz told her with a smile as Kate walked quickly toward the dressing room.

The studio seemed very quiet when she emerged, with the bodies huddled around the table as though over war games. Never again, she told herself, convinced she no longer cared. She headed rapidly toward the exit.

"Miss Manning, just a minute."

She turned at the sound of Carl Dietz's voice, but found him in consultation with Sandy and a small, plump man who gave her a broad smile.

Dietz finally said, "At two this afternoon. That all right, Miss Manning? The Barrymore Theatre. Tell Pete hello; poker game as usual." He smiled.

"Thank you. I will." An unexpected joy flooded through her as Kate continued dreamily over to the exit door, feeling the envious eyes of the other auditioners on her. First stage finished; how incredible.

Two o'clock. She would have to dash back to her apartment, leave a new message on her answering machine and drive out to Queens to pick up her truffles. She could deliver them if she rushed. No carmine car-

tons, but it was nine-thirty and she could do a lot in four hours.

"HELLO, this is Kate Manning. Sorry I'm not answering your call right now, but I will do so at precisely 1:30 p.m. today. Please call me then."

And if you don't call back, I don't care, Kate said to herself. *I'm going to collect my truffles and sing and dance in a Carl Dietz musical. Tony Kendall, you snookered yourself.*

Next step, a drive out to Queens. She opened her door and stepped quietly into the hall.

"He was looking for you."

The words made her jump. Petra's door was open a crack, and she was peering out.

"Who?" Kate asked.

"Your boyfriend. He was trying to pick your lock."

"Tony?" Kate said, feigning surprise. "Come on."

"He was. I asked him what he was doing. He said he'd been trying to call you and was afraid something had happened—"

Kate smiled. "He worries about me, the big lug."

"It should happen to me!" With that, Petra slammed her door.

Kate rushed down the stairs. *Damn him, she thought, he knew I was going to be at the rehearsal studio and he decided it was a good time to get at my answering machine. Well, good luck to him.*

Kate was back home at one o'clock, all the deliveries made. Her last errand had been to go to the bank and cash a check to cover the ransom for the transmitter. Why, she'd asked herself, was she doing this?

Now she was stretched out on her couch with a cup of coffee, waiting for the woman to call.

Kate had slipped into a half sleep when the telephone rang. Just as she grabbed for the receiver, her doorbell rang. "Hold it," she shouted, taking the receiver.

"Yes, who is this?" Kate said.

"What kind of question is that? Who are you?"

It was the same rough, aggressive voice. Kate heard her doorbell again. She would have to cut the woman short. It was one-thirty exactly.

"This is Kate's Chocolate Clouds," she said.

"Listen, my son said that carton of your so-called candies cost him one hundred dollars plus tax."

"All right," Kate said. "But we'll have to make it fast, where and when I say." Her doorbell sounded again.

"Kate?" It was Tony. His deep voice came clearly through the door. She felt fear wash over her.

"Cash," said the voice in her ear.

"Cash," Kate repeated. "I understand. Twenty minutes, the Barrymore Theatre, front entrance."

"So, how will I know you?"

"I'll know you. You'll be carrying a bright red box with a gold bow."

She hung up quickly. Tony continued to press the bell, so she opened the door. "For heaven's sake," she said, "I don't want Petra down my neck anymore." And as they faced each other, some of the fear drained away. He could not mean her any harm.

Tony brushed past her. She let the door fall shut.

"Sebastian Wellen lives," he declared triumphantly, "and he's the

president of International Estates! Computer error—in the form of temporary help at the switchboard. The candies he bought will be delivered to his staff tomorrow morning. So that leaves one, the stolen carton. We're going to sit and wait for that call." He took her in his arms and crushed her lips in a warm, loving kiss. "Did you get the part?"

"I won't if you don't let me go," she said, trying to pull away. It was not possible. She had misunderstood his phone conversation at Peter's. She had to trust him but dared not.

"Why did you walk out on me last night?" he asked suddenly. "I called you here after midnight, and you weren't home. What the hell's going on?"

"You were busy and I was tired, so I went home. Now, let me go, please. I have to rush. I'm due at the theater in ten minutes."

"I'll take you there. My car's downstairs."

"No."

He released her. "What the hell's gotten into you?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. I'm psyched up for my part, do you mind? This means everything to me."

"Kate," he said, "go ahead. I'm going to stick close to the phone here. No calls from an irate customer, by any chance?"

"I've been out all day," she told him. "Anyway, why would a thief call and complain that what he stole was the wrong thing?"

"A lot of people will go to great lengths to make a little money."

They stood looking at each other. Kate could feel the minutes ticking

away. *He knows*, she told herself. She could see it in his eyes.

"You know I love you," he said simply.

"No." She got her coat, feeling the most exquisite pain and happiness. "I don't know any such thing."

She closed the door and raced down the stairs. Damn Carl Dietz and his two o'clock call!

KATE SAW the carmine carton before she saw the tiny, rotund creature who was holding it. In ankle boots, a quilted ski parka and a peasant skirt, she had a healthy, rugged face and canny blue eyes.

"Come inside the theater," Kate said quickly. "I'm not going to stand out here." They stepped into the theater lobby.

"Kate's Chocolate Clouds?" It was the same deep voice.

"Let's take a look at the merchandise," Kate said.

"Okay," the woman frowned. "Only my son is outside, ready to pounce if you try anything."

"I'm glad. I hope he keeps his eyes open."

With a great deal of fuss, the woman opened the carton, to reveal an inner case of black. Inside that, Kate saw wires and chips and a mess of mechanical spaghetti.

"What is it?" the woman asked.

"Something we're testing out for measuring the chocolate," Kate said offhandedly, reaching into her bag for the money. In a quick exchange, she found herself with the invention. "Well, thank you," she said politely. "This should bring down the price of chocolate somewhat."

"I should say so!" The woman muttered something unintelligible and scurried away.

Feeling a sudden frisson of apprehension, Kate stopped short inside the backstage entrance.

"Carl Dietz," she told the watchman, who gave her an indifferent nod.

It was empty backstage. Onstage, standing in a pale, almost eerie light, someone was singing—a slender, shapely woman with a high, clear voice. Kate stood just inside the curtain, and saw Dietz in the center of the third row, sitting with a couple of other men. Sandy was at the piano. Kate recognized the singer as Brett Cousins, recently the star in a remake of *The Music Man*.

"Brett, honey, great," Carl Dietz called out when she'd finished. "Now, is Kate Manning around?"

Kate stepped out onto the stage. "Here I am, Mr. Dietz."

"Kate, I'm testing you for the role of Kitty because our original Kitty got herself a ticket to Hollywood." He smiled. "The script's in dressing room three. Take about twenty minutes to look it over and then come back."

As she turned to walk offstage, he called out. "Oh, and there was something about Pete. Something about waiting for him. He should be dropping in later on."

"Thank you," she said carefully and stepped back into the wings. It was a lovely day for holding her temper, considering there was nothing between her and Peter and never would be.

She stepped into a room lit only by the round bulbs that framed the dressing-table mirror. The script was

for *Anna Karenina*. Her heart gave a little leap. Of course! She had read about it in *Variety*.

Ten minutes later, she put the script down. A musical, in which *Anna Karenina* lives. Kate rather liked the idea of a happy ending.

Carl Dietz had said twenty minutes. She stood up and stretched. And saw the carton on a chair near the door. Damn. For a lovely while she had forgotten all about it.

She looked quickly around the dressing room for a hiding place and found a wooden trunk behind a dressing screen. In a moment, she had concealed the carton in the trunk, under a turquoise cape. Of course, she would have to get rid of the carton before going back to her apartment. She could place it in a locker in Grand Central Station, but if she was being shadowed, she might as well stand in Times Square and hawk it. An easier solution might be to stuff the invention into her duffel bag and bring it over to Shay for safekeeping. But no, she could not involve Shay or Bonnie in her problems.

Five more minutes before the reading. She should be studying her lines, not worrying about Tony's invention. There must be *someone* she could call.

Peter. The idea came to her clearly. Of course, that was the perfect solution! He was on his way down. He might as well be his brother's keeper. She would dump the whole thing in his lap.

Kate dialed his number from the pay phone outside. He answered on the fourth ring.

"Peter, this is Kate Manning."

"Well, my little love, how are you?"

"I'm at the Barrymore. Carl Dietz said I should wait for you, but he didn't say when you'd be here."

"Fifteen, twenty minutes from now. I was just putting on my best bib and tucker."

"Look, I have something that belongs to Tony, and I'd like you to take it off my hands. It's one of his weird inventions, and I want you to get it back to him. It's a long story, but I can't go into it now."

"Why can't you call Tony? No, don't answer that."

"We'll talk later, Peter." Kate hung up, sorry at once that she had decided to bring Peter into it.

She ran back into the dressing room, checked that the carton was safe, and went out into the wings.

The reading took no more than five minutes. The yellow lines sketching her part came to an end. Kate stopped. The theatre was quiet. She stayed very still. What had happened? She had no idea what she had done, what she had said.

Kate hugged the script close, waiting. Dietz was consulting his colleagues. One got up and walked down the aisle to the front entrance. The other, with the pianist, ran up on the stage and whispered into the right wing. Dietz, alone now, smiled across at Kate. "We have Brett Cousins for Anna, Michael Kaye for Vronsky, you know. I'm a taker of chances," he went on, "but I don't believe in overdoing it. Since we've got Brett and Mike, I can afford to be courageous with Kitty and Levin."

"Carl, long-distance call." His assistant beckoned him from the wings.

"Right." He stood up and smiled at Kate. "Okay, relax, get yourself some coffee or whatever."

She was alone on the stage, holding the sheaf of papers tightly in her hand, as though they were the only support she had. She closed her eyes for a moment but was suddenly aware of the profound silence in the theater, a silence almost too deep. There was someone out there in the vast darkness.

Without moving or showing the least alarm, she called out, "Who is it?"

There was no movement, no sound. She felt a faint prickling down the length of her spine. They had found her. She was aware of how alone she was, how vulnerable. "Who is it?" she asked once again.

"Pete."

Her relief was so complete, she went limp. Peter Kendall was coming slowly down the aisle toward her. "Oh, hi," she said. "You scared me." She gave a small, nervous laugh. "I don't know why."

"Didn't know I was the scaring type," Peter said, coming up on stage and kissing her on the cheek. "Congratulations. I watched from the back."

"You got here in record time."

"Today the city works." He took her hand. "You have the part and I didn't have a damn thing to do with it, but you can still give me full credit."

"Oh," she said, "if I have the part, I will, but Dietz didn't sound half as positive as you do. There's

something else, Peter. You're going to have to be a friend."

"Right," he said. "Tony's box of chocolates."

"His invention," she corrected. "He didn't want you to know about it, because it ended up in a carton of mine and we've had a merry chase over it." She let the truth spill out, to Peter's amused expression.

"And you won't tell me how you happen to have it and why you can't give it to Tony? He can't possibly be that angry with you over last night."

"I'm not interested in that," she said stiffly. "I just don't want anything more to do with him and that thing."

Peter released her hand. "I'll settle the whole business by sending it over to his apartment by messenger. And we'll both wash our hands of it."

She closed her eyes briefly. "I haven't been thinking straight. I could have done exactly the same thing. Well, wait just a minute. I'll be right back. In case Dietz comes—"

"Kate, hold it!" The voice, angry and urgent, came at her from the back of the theater. Tony strode quickly down the aisle and took the stairs to the stage two at a time. He came over to her, his eyes black with anger. "Damn it, you have it. You've had it the whole time!"

Kate stared at him. "How did you know?"

"Because some maniac called and tried to extort more than that hundred dollars you slipped her." He gave a short laugh. "Used for weighing chocolate." He turned to Peter, who was watching them casually, his hands in his trouser pock-

ets. "And you," Tony said. "I suppose you've come to collect your pound of flesh."

"Tony, how could you?" Kate said.

Peter laughed. "I think the lady is through with you, Tony. Why don't you just leave her alone?"

"I believe I'll wait to hear that from her." Tony had not taken his eyes off Kate.

"You betrayed me," she said simply.

"Betrayed you? What the devil are you talking about? This isn't a high school drama class, Kate, it's life. You walked out on me last night, and since then you've been playing a pretty dangerous game. Now hand me the box and then we're going home."

"That phone call to Mickey, whoever he is. I heard it, Tony. And I'm scared. Quote, 'I'll take care of her in my own way.' Unquote."

Tony laughed. "And so you called Peter, and he came charging in like the white knight. Get the box, Kate. If you're going to listen in on telephone calls, you deserve to be scared out of your wits."

"And that's all you have to say about it?"

"Get it. Now."

She looked at Peter, who stood very still, watching her. He gave a slight nod of his head. He was seeing another side of Tony, she thought, and it must have been a shock to him, too.

"Sure," she said to Tony. "You can have it and do whatever you want with it. Give it to the CIA or the KGB or the Chinese Communists or the man in the moon." She stalked off the stage.

Carl Dietz was still on the telephone. She passed close enough to catch his eye. He shrugged, pointed to the receiver and made a face. She nodded.

In seconds it would all be over, the chase, the excitement, the sensation of love. Tony would have his transmitter and she would have her part.

Kate stopped in the wings for a moment. The stage was silent. She had the impression that neither man had spoken a word while she was gone. Then she went quickly onstage, holding the carton out before her. "Here it is, Tony. The invention you're going to change the world with."

He turned but made no move toward her. He gave Peter a look of undisguised anger, then smiled gravely back at Kate, searching her face. "Kate," he began, "you misunderstood that phone call. I was trying to get you out of the way because—"

She did not let him finish. "Spare me any more details. Now take this damn thing, and I never want to see you again." She knew that if she did not stop, she would wind up weeping.

They stood several feet apart, looking at each other in silence, until Peter's quiet words broke the air.

"This is all very interesting, but time is running short." He gave Kate a grim smile. "So if you'll just hand the box over to me, we can end it all right now." He held out a hand.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tony demanded. "Peter has nothing to do with any of this, or with us," Tony said to Kate.

"It's too late, Tony. Time's run out." Peter moved swiftly. A gun

appeared in his other hand, pointed directly at Kate. Something happened to the silence in the theater. It was as if the three of them were actors onstage, giving one last, terrifying performance. Kate's gasp echoed in her ears. She saw Tony standing still, eyes glittering in a face devoid of expression.

"You?" he said.

Peter waved the gun at the carton. "If you please."

Kate, gripping the carton, felt its weight all at once. She looked at Tony for guidance.

"Tell her," Peter said. "You can reinvent your dangerous little toy, brother. Only it won't be quite the same thing, will it, once the *dreaded* enemy has it, too." He gave a quick, cold smile. "Tony, you really believe that reality is made up of black and white, good and evil. I never went along with that. There are only grays, old pal. The trick is to keep one step ahead of whatever is chasing you. In my case, it was too much of the good life, but unfortunately for you, the catching hasn't been so bad. My debts stay paid, and I continue to live the good life."

"Gambling," Tony stated quietly. "They got you, they recruited you. Tell me you had no choice. It's a sickness, Peter. Give me the gun and I'll forget all about this."

In response, Peter raised the gun a little higher. "I don't know what to do about you, Tony. If Kate will just hand it over, maybe we can reach a compromise. If not, I'm prepared to kill her. And you."

Kate heard the sound of the hammer being released, a clicking sound magnified in the empty theater.

Without looking at her, Tony spat the words out. "Do what he says, Kate."

"On the floor, very slowly, between us, Kate," Peter directed. "Do it. We've been playing long enough. We don't want Carl walking in on our little drama and offering to buy the television rights."

Kate did not dare look at Tony again. Slowly she shifted the weight of the box to her right arm. Nine or ten pounds. One sack of Long Island potatoes. Years of ballet lessons had strengthened her upper arms.

"You're shaking," Peter said. "Just stay cool, my little Kate. Gentle, now."

"Pete!" Tony took a step toward him, and in that moment, Kate hefted the carton and threw it squarely at Peter. The toss landed short, but the action gave Tony enough time to smash into his brother. The gun clattered across the stage.

Both men were on the floor, locked in a fierce struggle. Kate went quickly for the gun. She heard the harsh sound of fists against flesh, and when she stood up, she saw Tony pinned to the floor by his brother.

"I don't want to have to shoot you, but I will," she said carefully, aiming the gun at Peter.

He laughed and stood up, dusting himself off. "You wouldn't shoot me, Kate, would you?"

"Try me."

He shrugged, a twisted smile on his face. "Go ahead. My life's over anyway."

The carton lay on the floor between them, the contents of the black box spilling out of it like stuffing

from an old, discarded doll. Tony got up and faced his brother. "You bastard, you would have killed her!"

They stood silently, all three, for a long moment, until the silence was broken by the sudden sound of applause, coming from the center of the empty house. Two hands clapping slowly, delightedly.

"Lovely, just lovely. Best mystery drama of the year, at the very least."

Tony turned swiftly and looked out into the rows of seats. Midway down, he found the man sitting all alone. Back up against the walls, side and rear, were dark, shadowy figures. When Tony spoke, his voice held almost too much control. "Mickey, you son of a bitch, you set me up. You knew exactly who the mark was, *and* that I'd never go along with your bloody scheme if you told me my own brother was the traitor."

"It was such a neat, elegant plan, Tony," Mickey came down the aisle toward the stage. "That's the way I like them. It was Emil," he added, "and a box of chocolates that put the crimp in this one."

"And you don't like crimps, do you? You're the one who cleaned out Emil's shop and put him away," Tony said evenly, "*and* kept me in the dark."

Mickey's eyes gleamed. "We closed him up to save his life. We assumed the KGB would think he took himself off because he was scared to death. And now he'll be away permanently. You'll have to find another source to satisfy your sweet tooth."

"I could kill you merely for that smug look on your face," Tony

growled. "You were behind us all along, weren't you?"

"Sometimes in front of you," Mickey responded with a broad grin. But then he became serious. "We didn't like handling it this way, but our success transcended personal considerations."

Carl Dietz came rushing out onstage at that moment. "Pete," he exclaimed, "we found our Kitty!"

"Glad to be of service." Peter smiled regretfully.

Dietz, now aware of Tony and Mickey and the gun, frowned. "What the hell's going on?"

Pete shrugged and slowly descended the stage stairs. "Just a couple of poker pals," he said. "Come about a payoff." He turned once and winked at Kate.

KATE ATTENDED a party on Christmas Eve at Shay's studio. At midnight, everyone trooped to Grace Church in Greenwich Village for the Christmas service. At one-thirty on Christmas morning, she was back in her apartment, wrapped in a velour robe, adding last-minute decorations to a small tree. Her telephone rang.

"Yes?"

"I tried you earlier."

"I was at church."

There was a brief silence at the other end. "Kate, I saw you there. I thought I could just walk away and forget you, but I was wrong. What are the odds of your offering a fellow a glass of Christmas cheer?"

"I've been waiting for you all week."

When her doorbell rang from downstairs, she went out in the hall and waited for him.

Tony bounded up the stairs. He seemed unexpectedly taller than she remembered him. She wanted to hug him close and never let go. Instead, she stepped silently aside. He walked past her and glanced about the room. When she had closed the door behind her, still not saying a word, he gathered her in his arms.

"I was afraid you wouldn't want a man whose brother was a traitor," he said simply.

"Well, I don't think you could ever run for president now, but it's an idea I can live with."

"What will we tell the children?" This time his smile reached his eyes.

"That their uncle was a gamblin' man. And gamblin' men can lose their sense of right and wrong."

He kissed her then, with a sweet fierceness, and she felt a longing so intense that her body shook with the emotion.

"I'm different," Tony whispered. "I may never be the same again. But I know that I love you, and that will never change. Tell me that you're the same Kate and that you love me, no matter what."

"Tony," she said softly, "whatever you are, whatever you feel, it's all part of me now. I love you and everything about you."

He brought her over to the couch. "I don't want to talk anymore. I just want to make love to you."

She was in his arms and he was holding her tight, letting her know that he would never let her go.

"Tony," she said suddenly, "I haven't any Christmas present for you!"

He raised his head and looked longingly at her. "I'm holding my Christmas present."

They kissed again and his body came down on hers, hard and insistent, sweeping her along as if he had to make up for so much lost time. Their lovemaking was rushed and fevered, two lovers who had known each other just briefly before. He was at once tender and demanding, locking her close with the strength of his desire. He whispered her name, and the wonder of his voice touched her heart. She rose to meet him, clasping him in an embrace so complete, it sealed their love from that moment on.

Solution to
CROSSWORD #16
VOL.3 NO. 4





ANNETTE BROADRICK

Return to Yesterday



Felicia only came back to Dane because she needed his help—searching for her missing brother would be dangerous, but would Dane pose an even greater threat?



Felicia St. Clair stared out the small window of the plane, watching the dark, swirling clouds surround the wingtip. As the plane descended from its Los Angeles to Austin flight, the local weather made itself felt. Driving rain beat against the aircraft.

Felicia glanced down at her hands, which were gripped tightly together in her lap. She felt strange returning home to Texas. Whenever she had tried to imagine a homecoming, she always visualized her brother, Adam, there to greet her. Adam, with his contagious grin and sparkling eyes.

Five years her senior, he had been the hub of her life as a young girl. He'd taken the place of the father she'd never known. After their mother had died, when Felicia was twelve, Adam had become both parents and brother.

Thinking about him made the hollow feeling in her stomach more pronounced, the same feeling she'd had since Dane had called to tell her that Adam had disappeared somewhere in Mexico.

Please, God, don't let anything happen to him.

Adam had always been there when she'd needed him. And never had Felicia needed him more than now, when she would soon be forced to see Dane Rineholt again and pretend he was just a family friend.

The Fasten Seat Belts sign flashed on and Felicia hastily checked her

appearance in a small compact mirror. Her sun-streaked blond hair was fashionably shaped in a long, straight bob that flipped under at her shoulders. The face staring back at her looked considerably different from that of the naive young woman who had left the state five years before, convinced her heart was broken because Dane didn't love her.

At least she had a few more hours before she would have to face him. She hadn't told him she was coming, but had reserved a rental car at the airport. The drive to the ranch would give her time to prepare for their meeting.

Would Dane recognize the well-dressed, young executive as the girl who had followed him and Adam around the ranch for years? She hoped not. Felicia hoped that girl, with all her foolish dreams, had been put aside.

After disembarking from the plane she searched for the rental car sign. She spotted Dane as she reached the doorway to the terminal. He stood head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd.

How had he known she'd be on that plane? Or even that she would be coming? She hadn't told him. His news had left her so shaken that she barely remembered hanging up the phone.

Dane's piercing gaze met hers over the crowd and she mentally acknowledged that, like it or not, she

now had to deal with the feelings he stirred within her. His steel-gray eyes seemed to see deep inside her, reading her thoughts and sensing her emotions.

Felicia was swept along with the jostling passengers until she reached Dane. His impassive gaze never wavered. Whatever his thoughts, he kept them well hidden. Whatever emotions were stirred by seeing her after five years were his own private feelings.

She fought the urge to throw herself into his arms like a child needing to be comforted. Instead she asked him, "Have you heard anything from Adam?"

He shook his head, lightly grasping her arm just above the elbow and piloting her down the concourse to the baggage claim area. "Nothing."

With one touch, Dane took control—of her and of the situation. The years seemed to drop away and Felicia shook her head to dispel the sensation.

"How did you know I was coming in?"

He glanced down at her and with a slight quirk of his well-shaped mouth, he murmured, "I've known you a long time, Felicia," as though that explained everything.

"Does anybody have any idea what might have happened to him?" she asked, returning to the subject of Adam.

"The authorities have spoken to the personnel at the hotel in Monterrey where Adam stays. No one could pinpoint the exact time he was last seen there. When I talked with him last Friday, he said he intended to return home no later than yesterday

morning. When he didn't show up, I called down there and discovered he hadn't slept in his room since Thursday night."

They both were silent, then Felicia finally asked, "Why had he gone to Mexico?"

"On business," was Dane's terse reply.

"Ranching?"

"He and I have several other interests."

His response emphasized the strained relationship between them. Felicia had deliberately cut herself off from any knowledge of the ranch in general and Dane Rineholt in particular. She could hardly complain now that she didn't know anything about his and Adam's shared activities.

While they stood waiting for her luggage, Felicia noticed the admiring glances from females that Dane's tall, lean figure drew. He'd had that effect on women as long as she'd known him.

His fleece-lined denim jacket clung to his shoulders, emphasizing their breadth, then narrowed to his flat, slim waist. Long, muscled legs were outlined by snug Levi's. He didn't need the added height his custom-made boots gave him.

Dane Rineholt was the epitome of the Texas rancher. Even in February his face was deeply tanned, except for the line on his forehead from the Stetson he wore. He held the hat loosely in his hand now, slapping it against his hard thigh as they waited.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Felicia finally said.

"Didn't you?" His sardonic response surprised her. "I knew you

wouldn't take my advice and stay in L.A. This was the first flight you could have caught after I called."

"I didn't realize I was so predictable."

"You are to me."

Felicia didn't like the sound of that at all. She had hoped that as she'd grown older she had learned to hide what she was thinking and feeling. Of course Dane knew how close she was to Adam, so his guessing her actions this time wasn't too surprising.

She was an adult now, she reminded herself, an editor on a prestigious women's magazine. She had a life of her own, a career. What more could she want?

Dane nodded toward the baggage carousel. "You'll have to point out which ones are yours," he said in his husky drawl.

Placing his Stetson on his head, he then picked up her bags and headed toward the door. Felicia followed reluctantly.

She thought of her intended rental car and regretted the loss of freedom. Instead she would have to borrow whatever was available at the ranch to drive to Mexico.

Of course, there was always the chance that by the time they reached the ranch Adam might have called, explaining his delay and apologizing for the scare.

Dane set her luggage down by the door while he studied the blowing rain. "Wait here while I bring the car around." He thrust the door open and strode toward the parking area, arrogantly knowing she would obey.

Felicia smiled slightly at the memories his tone of voice provoked. A

picture of Adam flashed in her mind and she knew he would be amused to think of them together without him around to referee. *Oh, Adam, please be all right*, she thought with a pang.

A late-model automobile drew up and Dane stepped out, placing her bags in the trunk while she climbed into the passenger's seat.

"This isn't a very good advertisement for the sunny South," Felicia said lightly.

"We need the rain," he stated as they pulled away.

"That's what Adam said last time he called."

"When did you speak with him last?"

She thought back. "About two weeks ago. Why?"

"Just wondered."

"What's going on, Dane?" she asked quietly. "You know more than you're telling."

"Now what's your vivid imagination cooking up, Tadpole?" he asked.

Tadpole. How she had hated that nickname. Felicia let her eyes focus on the rapidly moving windshield wipers, glad after all that she wasn't the one having to drive. Visibility was poor. The streets and highway were flooded.

Yet she felt safe. Dane had always made her feel that she could depend on him, even when she was the most irritated by his autocratic manner.

Resting her head wearily against the cushioned headrest, Felicia allowed her eyes to drift closed. She hadn't been able to rest since Dane's phone call the night before. But now the rhythmic swish of the wipers lulled her into a restless sleep.

FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD Felicia St. Clair stepped off the school bus at the end of the lane. A hot breeze caused a dust swirl to greet her.

How she hated Texas. The heat, the dirt, Adam's constant concern over water and the state of the cattle. He was too young to have to deal with the ranch, yet he'd assumed full responsibility at the ripe old age of seventeen when their mother had died three years ago.

She sometimes wondered how he stood it. Of course Pete had been there. Otherwise Adam would never have managed the two years of college at Texas A & M, driving home every weekend to help where he could. But Adam hadn't bothered to go back this year.

Pete had been their father's foreman, and had stayed on these fifteen years, looking after the ranch and his best friend's family. But Adam had grown up too fast. He'd never had a chance to be a carefree boy.

After their mother had died, he'd hired a housekeeper to look after them. Millie had done all she could to make the orphaned teenagers feel like they had a family.

Felicia gripped her schoolbooks tighter and began the long walk to the house.

Lately Adam had spent his evenings poring over the account books. There had been little moisture the previous winter and she knew he was worried.

Felicia's daydreams carried her far away from the dusty track. She was a famous writer living in a penthouse apartment in New York. Or Paris, London, Rome. She was

busily working out how much money to send Adam each month for the ranch when Prince, their dog, came bounding up to her.

"Oh, Prince, you fool. Get down. You'd think I'd been gone for years." She was laughing at his antics and walking backward, scolding him, which was why she didn't see Adam and the stranger standing on the porch, until she turned to start up the steps.

The man was several inches taller than Adam, but they were similar in build: broad shoulders, slim waist and hips, long legs. They were even dressed similarly. But where Adam's open expression made him look even younger than his twenty years, the stranger's face was closed, his eyes slitted against the bright sunlight, his hat pulled down low. He seemed much older than Adam.

Felicia felt all knees and elbows as she gazed up at the man leaning gracefully against the porch rail. A hollow place seemed to form somewhere just below her ribs and she unconsciously placed her hand there, wondering why the stranger had suddenly made her aware of what she looked like. She had never cared before.

"Hi, sis," Adam said. "I want you to meet Dane Rineholt."

Felicia tentatively smiled. "H'lo."

Adam continued. "Dane, this is my sister, Felicia, one of the best ranch hands we've got."

"I'm the *only* ranch hand you've got, besides Pete," she pointed out.

"Well, that's going to change. Dane has agreed to become a partner on the ranch."

Felicia stared at the other man. "You mean you are now part owner of the St. Clair ranch?"

Dane slowly straightened. "That's right." His tone made it clear the subject wasn't open to debate.

Felicia could feel her heart racing. She had a sudden instinctive feeling that nothing in her life would be the same again.

She glanced at her brother. "Does that mean he's going to live with us?" she asked in a low voice.

A sudden, slashing smile caused Dane's face to take on an entirely different look. Felicia could only stare at the transformation.

"That's what it means, all right. But you don't need to worry. I'm no threat to a tadpole like you, honey."

BY THE TIME she was a senior in high school, two years later, Felicia knew there would never be another man in her life to compare with Dane Rineholt.

She couldn't understand the flurry of confused emotions that came over her whenever he was around. She hated being so aware of him and tried to cover up her reactions—not that her behavior toward him seemed to matter. Dane treated her the same way Adam did, with a casual familiarity, so that Felicia bristled at everything he said and did. Particularly the odious nickname Tadpole.

Perhaps she had been in the transition between child and adult when he'd first met her, but two years had brought changes. Slowly but surely the angular parts of her body had begun to fill out, becoming firm and rounded.

Her mirror told Felicia that she was not ugly. Wide-spaced gray-green eyes stared back at her, framed by long, thick lashes. High cheekbones gave her face an elegant shape. And her tanned skin made the light color of blond hair even more noticeable.

The boys at school had taken to hanging around the ranch in their spare time, which was little enough, because they, too, had work to do at home.

Adam enjoyed teasing her about her following, but Dane never said a word. He just sat there watching her, amused mockery in his eyes.

Until the night Blaze was sick.

Dane's presence had meant there was money enough to buy more stock, including horses, as well as hire additional help. And when one of the mares had a colt, Adam had allowed Felicia to keep it.

She never gave up her dreams of leaving Texas and becoming a writer. Yet she also enjoyed being outdoors and working with the horses. Especially Blaze. So when he became ill she was beside herself.

"I don't think it's anything too serious." Pete tried to comfort her. "Probably something he ate."

She hoped he was right, but she was still prepared to spend the night in the barn in case he became worse. She was kneeling beside the horse, murmuring softly, when she looked up to see Dane.

"I don't see any reason for you to stay out here tonight, Tadpole. Blaze is looking much better."

"He seems to rest easier when I'm here. Every time I get up he starts stirring."

"You're spoiling that damned horse, you know."

"I don't care."

Dane knelt down beside her. "That horse is all you care about, isn't it?"

She glanced up at him, startled. "Of course not. I care about Adam and Millie and Pete. And you."

He grinned. "Well, I'm glad I made your list, anyway. Sometimes it's hard to tell with you."

"If you didn't tease me so much, I'd probably be a lot nicer to you. Did anyone ever tease you?" she asked, stroking Blaze's neck.

"Are you kidding? With two older brothers?"

"How old are you, Dane?"

He lifted one brow. "How old do you think I am?"

Trying not to smile, she offered, "Oh, forty or so."

He grabbed her by the shoulders and lightly shook her. "You know better. I haven't reached thirty yet."

"But you're still years older than I am."

"Ten years, but well preserved." He grinned.

"I suppose. Some people might find you attractive."

"Some people, but not you, I take it?"

"For an old man you aren't too bad."

He threw back his head and laughed. After a few minutes, she said in a quiet voice, "Thank you for checking on us tonight."

"No problem. Look. He's doing much better. Why don't we go back to the house?" He stood and pulled her up beside him. Blaze never

stirred and Felicia admitted to herself that he seemed much better.

They crossed the area between the barn and the house in silence. A full moon cast mysterious shadows and Felicia paused, gazing up at the sky with a pleasurable sense of belonging.

Her view was suddenly blocked as Dane leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. Pulling back, he said in a low voice, "You look like a fairy princess standing here bathed in silver light. I couldn't resist."

She stared at him in wonder, realizing that he had just given her her first kiss.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't," she managed.

"You just surprised me."

"I take it you aren't used to being kissed."

"On the contrary," she said loftily. "I'm just not used to *you* kissing me, that's all."

Felicia was glad he couldn't know how her heart was racing as he pulled her into his arms and said, "Oh, then you won't mind if I kiss you again."

Before she could offer a reply, his mouth had found hers once more. However, this kiss was very different from the first one. This time his arms were firmly around her, pulling her close to his hard body. His mouth felt firm and she gasped with surprise. Taking advantage of her parted lips, he ran his tongue along the uneven edge of her teeth, lightly forcing his way inside her mouth.

Felicia couldn't think as new sensations swept over her. She felt hot and cold at the same time and her

knees would not have supported her weight. But Dane stood with his legs braced, holding her against him as he slowly explored the depths of her mouth.

Feeling the urge to touch him, Felicia placed her hands around his waist and began smoothing the material that covered his muscled back. She could feel his heart pounding and she realized that this was better than any of her fantasies.

Dane's hand moved slowly up and down her spine as though memorizing it. A tingling sensation followed everywhere he touched and she found herself wanting to get closer to him somehow. She moaned slightly, unaware that she did so.

Dane lifted his head abruptly. She never knew for sure why he stopped, only that he did. She couldn't see his eyes because his face was in shadow.

"I'm sorry, Felicia, I shouldn't have done that." He shook his head as though trying to clear it, meanwhile stepping away from her.

"You don't have to apologize," she managed to mutter. "It's okay."

"I'll see you tomorrow." He turned to walk away, then paused and said, "I promise I won't do that again, Tadpole. I never meant to take advantage of you."

"You didn't."

He shrugged. "Good night."

Felicia spent a very restless night, trying to come to grips with the feelings Dane had invoked in her, trying not to feel rejected because of his actions after the kiss. One thing she knew. She would have to hide her feelings from Dane even more so now. She was sure he would make

fun of her if he thought she cared for him. He still saw her as a child.

But Felicia no longer felt like a child. Dane's kiss had introduced her to the burning ache of adult emotions.

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THE RAIN was getting worse, if anything, and Dane was forced to slow down for safety's sake. He glanced at the sleeping woman beside him.

He had honestly thought he was over her. After all, five years was a long time and there had been many women willing to take the place she had occupied in his mind and heart.

He still remembered the first time he'd seen her. She couldn't have been more than fifteen, with a coltish quality about her he'd found instantly endearing.

She'd been walking up the lane from the county road, playing with the dog, her smile so radiant that it practically lit up the countryside.

He'd forgotten that there was such innocence in the world. After the years he'd spent overseas, and later in his special investigative field, he'd returned to Texas to try and establish a quiet, ordinary life-style.

He had met with Adam St. Clair several times, working on the partnership agreement, before he finally saw Felicia. He hadn't given much thought to what it would mean to share the home of a young girl slowly blossoming into womanhood. Until he saw her that day.

He glanced over at her now. Knowing how close she was to Adam, Dane couldn't have kept his disappearance from her. He had also

known she wouldn't be able to stay away.

Dane frowned. If there were only some kind of clue to follow. Adam knew that the work was dangerous and Dane felt responsible for having recruited him. But Adam had been a natural. He enjoyed the intrigue, but didn't take unnecessary chances. In the four years they had been working with the government, they had managed to stop some major sources of drug smuggling between the States and Mexico.

Now Dane was afraid Adam's luck had run out.

On the surface he was a tourist-businessman who had mysteriously disappeared while visiting a foreign country. But the covert authorities on both sides knew this could be more sinister. Adam wouldn't be the first agent to disappear and never be heard of again.

The question was what to tell Felicia. Adam had casually mentioned after one of his trips to L.A. that what they were doing had been made easier by the fact that she was far enough away not to ask questions. Adam had never told her about their activities.

Their contacts across the border had no idea Dane and Adam worked together. They had independently infiltrated unrelated drug operations. But if some news didn't turn up in the next few days, Dane would jeopardize his cover and go down there to use his own sources.

Once again he glanced over at Felicia.

He would never forget how she'd looked a few weeks before she'd graduated from university. At

twenty-two she was one of the loveliest women he'd ever seen.

For four years he had worked hard to give her the impression that he was serious about someone else so that she wouldn't practice her budding feminine wiles on him. He lived with her and yet wasn't a relative. There was no way he'd betray Adam's trust by taking advantage of her innocence.

The situation improved somewhat after she left for college, even though she came home occasionally for a weekend. He planned his weekends so that he was seldom there when she was.

After four years of that routine he'd been lulled into a sense of false security, until he'd felt there was no longer a problem. Then she had asked him to escort her to one of the graduation festivities, and like a fool he agreed to go.

Dane showed up at her dorm at the appointed hour and got his first glimpse of the woman she'd become while he wasn't looking.

She took his breath away.

Felicia wore a floor-length gown of the softest blue-green he'd ever seen. Her eyes glittered, their color enhanced by an iridescent green underslip that shimmered through the sheer surface of the softly swirling material.

Her hair had been cut so that feathering curls framed her face, drawing attention to the patrician line of brow, high cheekbones and dainty nose.

She looked like a princess, and Dane knew he had been fighting a losing battle over his feelings for her.

He and Felicia had never danced together before. Dane couldn't deny that he enjoyed holding her in his arms during the few slow numbers, but that created its own problems. He didn't know which was worse—holding her close and forcing his body not to react to her nearness, or watching her stand in front of him during the upbeat numbers, her face flushed and smiling, her body dipping and weaving in unconsciously provocative movements.

Dane felt relieved when Felicia suggested they leave.

They were in the car returning to her dorm when she asked, "Are you driving home tonight?"

"No. I'm staying at a motel."

"Oh. Will I see you again before you leave?"

"I hadn't planned on it. Why? Did you want a ride home?"

"Oh, no. I still have another week at school before I can go home."

They lapsed back into silence.

"Would you like to get something to eat?" Dane asked finally. "I think I saw an all-night restaurant near the motel. Or do you have to be back right away?"

"I have plenty of time, Dane. I just don't want to delay you anymore. I really do appreciate your coming to Austin to take me to the dance." The smile she gave him almost caused him to miss his turn.

Dane sat across from her during their meal, fascinated by her ever changing expressions as she told him hilarious tales of life in the dorm and on campus.

When they left the restaurant Felicia asked if he would show her his

room, explaining that she'd never been inside a motel room.

"I find that hard to believe," he responded, reluctantly walking her across to the motel.

"It's true. We never traveled."

"And no man has ever coaxed you in to one?" he asked, opening the door.

She grinned. "I didn't say they haven't tried, Dane."

His room was a standard style, with a king-size bed taking up most of the space. A sliding glass door spanned the width of the room. Felicia parted the draperies slightly.

"Oh, look. You have a pool!"

"Most motels do."

She spun around with a mischievous sparkle in her eye. "I know! Why don't we go swimming?"

He sat down, her youthful exuberance suddenly making him feel his added years. "Felicia, use your head. Neither of us brought anything to swim in."

She glanced back at the window, then at him. "Nobody would see us swimming now, you know. Couldn't we swim in our underwear?"

He studied her for a moment, then slowly shook his head. "I don't think Adam would approve."

But something in his voice told her he was weakening. She disappeared into the bathroom. "I'll keep a towel around me in case anyone is watching. Come on, Dane. It'll be fun."

She had echoed his thoughts and while she was slipping out of her formal, he quickly undressed, finding a pair of Levi's to wear, so that when she reappeared he silently opened the sliding door and stepped outside.

The night was hot and muggy, typical of Texas in late spring. Indirect lighting gave a soft glow to the pool area.

Dane unfastened his jeans and pulled them off, revealing navy blue briefs that could pass for swimming trunks.

Felicia tossed her towel on a nearby chair and he had to admit there was nothing childish about the body revealed to him. Her lacy underwear was probably more than adequate for today's swimwear styles. Gone were her coltish lines and in their place, a slender young woman with curving breasts and thighs, and a waist that made him want to wrap his hands around it.

He forced himself to look away, waiting until he heard her splashing around.

"Come on in," she said gaily, "the water feels great."

At first he stayed the pool length away from her, swimming laps to keep his mind off her and how she looked in the moonlight.

Eventually she came gliding through the water to join him at the deep end of the pool.

"Don't you ever just relax and enjoy the water?" she asked. "You act as though you're training for the Olympics!"

He ran his hand through his hair, flicking water over them both. "Just getting rid of some excess energy."

"I see," she said, and moved closer, placing her hand beside his on the tile rim of the pool.

"Dane? Are you upset about anything?"

He eyed her warily. "No, why?"

"I don't know. You just seem jumpy. I thought a swim might help to relax you."

He lifted one brow slightly. "Oh, you did, did you? My, the sacrifices you're prepared to make for out-of-town guests."

Her predictable temper got the better of her and she suddenly hit the water with both hands, causing a wave to break over him. Then she swam underwater toward the other end of the pool, but Dane was waiting for her. Giving her only enough time to get a mouthful of air, he pushed her back under.

No matter where she tried to go, he was waiting for her, until they were both panting from the exertion.

"Give up, Tadpole. You can't win," he said between breaths.

They were in the middle of the pool. Dane was able to stand, but the water was over Felicia's head. He heard her labored breathing and, without considering the consequences, pulled her into his arms. The buoyancy of the water floated her closer to him. Her legs entangled with his until he realized she was straddling his thigh. He felt the warmth of her as her thighs clamped around him in an unconscious invitation.

Dane glanced down at her as Felicia slowly raised her head. Succumbing to the overwhelming temptation, he placed his lips on hers in a soft kiss. They felt cool and moist. Her mouth opened beneath his—so naturally, so inevitably, that he let go of the side of the pool to pull her even closer. The water provided a warm cocoon of sensation as

her body glided smoothly against him.

It was only when Dane realized he couldn't breathe that he kicked them back to the surface. This time he found his footing in shallower water.

Once again they were both gasping for air, but when their lungs filled this time their mouths blindly searched for each other again. Dane forced himself to raise his head and looked down into Felicia's upturned face. Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly swollen from the pressure of his kisses. He could feel her breasts against his chest while she took quick, shallow breaths.

Never before had Dane come so close to losing complete control of himself.

"Felicia?" he whispered. "I think we've done enough swimming for one evening, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," she agreed and continued to hang on to him as he moved toward the steps in the shallow end of the pool.

Dane slipped his arms under her thighs and shoulders. Once out of the pool, he lowered her legs and reached for the towel she had left on a chair.

Back in his room he refused to look at her. Instead he handed her a shirt.

"Get out of those wet clothes and put this on. Then I'll drive you back to the dorm."

Felicia disappeared into the bathroom without a word and Dane grabbed a towel and hurriedly began to dry off. He pulled on a dry pair of briefs, then his Levi's.

He was towel-drying his hair when he heard the bathroom door open. He glanced around. His shirt hung to her knees. The lightweight material could not conceal that she no longer wore a bra. If she'd followed his directions, she no longer wore panties, either.

How had he gotten himself into this situation?

"Are you ready to go?" he asked gruffly.

Felicia's eyes glowed. "No. I don't want to go. I want to stay with you." Her smile made his heart pause in its rapid beat. She placed her palms on his bare chest, and Dane knew at that moment that he had lost the battle. Blindly he reached for her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her tightly against his aroused body.

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THE RHYTHMIC swish of the wipers provided a steady undertone for the sound of the hard driving rain. Forcing her eyes open, Felicia realized that night had fallen.

"Where are we?" she asked Dane.

"About a mile out of Mason," he responded. "I thought we'd stop and eat before going home. I told Millie not to bother fixing anything for us."

"How is Millie?"

"Same as usual."

"Hasn't thrown up her hands in disgust trying to look after two crusty old bachelors, huh?" Her light tone broke into a husky whisper.

"He's okay, Felicia. Who knows? He may already be at the ranch by now."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

He was silent, watching the road. "I thought we'd eat at The Homestead. It's a restaurant built on one of the old places. I think you'll like it."

They drove up a lane that didn't seem to be marked with any signs, through a gate standing hospitably open, and she saw the restaurant, warm light shining from several windows. As Dane opened the door for her, Felicia caught the scent of wood burning and saw a massive fireplace at one end of the room.

A blond woman with a cheerful smile greeted them. "Well, hello, Dane. I didn't expect we'd see you out on a night like this." She led them over to one of the small tables in front of the fireplace.

"Charlotte, this is Adam's sister, Felicia St. Clair."

If anything, Charlotte's smile grew broader. "I'm so pleased to meet you, Felicia. I've heard so much about you from Dane and Adam." She took their orders and headed for the kitchen.

In the car Felicia could pretend she wasn't with Dane, had even managed to sleep. But in the soft lamp-light of the restaurant she was forced to look at what her heart had never forgotten.

If possible, Dane had grown more handsome. At thirty-seven, his thick, black hair was beginning to show flecks of silver around his ears. It was still hard for her to believe that he had remained single.

Perhaps he preferred to play the field. The only thing she knew for sure was that he didn't want her.

He'd made that extremely clear five years ago and she would do well to remember that. He was her brother's partner. That's all.

"I intend to go to Monterrey," she said after Charlotte had served their meal and left once more.

Dane's head jerked up. "The hell you are. Why?"

"To find Adam."

"It's too dangerous," he stated in a flat tone.

"People go down there all the time. There's nothing dangerous about it."

"Even though Adam might argue the point?"

She didn't need to be reminded. Perhaps it was dangerous, but that wasn't going to deter her. She continued to eat, determined not to let him upset her.

The rain had slackened some by the time they left.

"You aren't serious about going to Mexico, are you?" Dane asked once they pulled up in front of the house.

"Yes. I'm very serious."

"What about your job?"

"I explained that it was a family emergency. My assistant can handle the routine things. If not, she's to call me."

He got out of the car and came around to open her door. He wished to hell he knew how to keep her out of Mexico. He knew better than to try to use threats. Once she got the bit between her teeth, there was no controlling her. He knew that as well as anyone.

In the house, Dane found a note on the kitchen table listing his phone messages. But no word about Adam. Dane crossed the hall to the living

room to turn off the lamp Millie had left on for them. Felicia was standing in the middle of the room.

"It all looks so familiar," she said with a catch in her voice. "I don't know why I expected it to change." She ran her hand along the bookcase. "He saved all my books."

Tears glistened as they ran down her cheeks. "It's just as though I left this morning. And Adam will come stomping in from the porch any minute now."

He couldn't stand to see her pain. In two long strides Dane reached her side and pulled her roughly into his arms. She stiffened at his touch, but he didn't let go, and gradually he felt her relax.

God, she felt so good to him. How long had it been since he'd held her? Too long. How had he found the strength to let her go? The truth was, he'd had no choice. She wanted no part of the only kind of life he could live.

Felicia gave up battling her tears and let them flow. She had missed her home. And even though she talked with Adam frequently and saw him at least twice a year, she had to face how much she missed him.

The most traumatic truth Felicia faced during the past few hours was how she felt about Dane. He was so much a part of her past. And she loved him.

His hands slowly stroked her back and he murmured, "He's going to be okay, love. He'll be home soon."

If only she *were* his love. Fighting for some control over her emotions, she loosened her hold around Dane's waist. He slowly dropped his arms and stepped back.

With calm deliberation, Felicia met his gaze. "I intend to leave tomorrow."

"If you insist on going to Mexico, I'm going with you," he replied.

His tone of voice made it very clear that he had no intention of changing his mind.

Part of her reason for leaving so soon was to get away from Dane. So much for that idea. However, she hadn't looked forward to making the trip alone, either. Despite the pain of being around him, Felicia knew there was no one she'd rather have on her side if the going got rough.

Nodding in acceptance, she went upstairs to her old room. The furniture gleamed in the soft lamplight and she ran her hand across the crazy quilt that her mother had made from scraps of the clothes Felicia had outgrown.

Feeling totally drained, she tossed back the covers and wearily crawled into bed.

Perhaps it was being home again that triggered old memories that helped form her dreams. In particular she kept recalling her senior year at the university, when she'd finally gotten up the nerve to invite Dane to escort her to one of the graduation dances.

If anyone had asked her that spring what her hopes and dreams were, she could have readily listed them. She wanted to marry Dane, return to the ranch that had always been her home, help with the local paper and try her hand at writing a novel. Since Dane had not announced any engagement by her senior year, Felicia had begun to

hope that he'd been waiting for her to finish school.

The question was, did he love her? And if he did, did he want to marry her?

It was no wonder she was nervous when she came downstairs at the dorm to meet him. And later, while they were swimming, Felicia began to hope that all of her dreams were about to come true.

Dane didn't kiss her as though he still saw her as a child. And there was no way he could hide from her his physical reaction to their closeness.

She couldn't control the shiver of anticipation that ran through her when she walked out of the bathroom and found Dane standing there, wearing only a pair of jeans. When his arms wrapped around her, she knew she was where she wanted to be. His mouth came down on hers in a desperate possession, one that she was willing to allow. How many years had she dreamed of this moment with this man?

His kiss was even better than she remembered. She loved the feel of him so close to her and she felt her knees give way. Without taking his mouth from hers, he carried her to the nearby bed.

Both of them fell across it, arms entwined, mouths still touching. The shirt she wore had ridden up on her hip and his hand found her bare skin and gently rubbed across it, back and forth, until she thought she would cry out with the intensity of the feeling.

She couldn't resist touching his chest, something she had often yearned to do. And as he ran his hand softly from the top of her rib

cage to where her thighs met, her stomach muscles tightened.

Felicia pulled back slightly, trying to get her breath. She gazed into his blazing eyes and reminded herself that this was Dane and anything he did was all right.

With probing fingers he caressed her, touching her gently. She wanted to touch him, and slid her hand into his jeans, feeling the hardness there—a smooth hardness that she found fascinating.

Dane lowered his head, nudged the shirt aside with his mouth, and found the tip of her breast. His tongue caressed the point until the nipple grew taut. Then his lips slipped over the pebblelike hardness and coaxed it into his mouth.

Felicia thought she was going to explode with the intensity of her feelings. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Dane shifted on the bed, one leg thrown across her thighs as he gathered her closer.

One moment he was kissing her passionately, his tongue imitating the erotic rhythm of his fingers, the next moment he froze.

Pulling away slightly, he looked down at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked breathlessly.

"You're a virgin," he stated in a flat voice.

"Yes," she agreed, bewildered.

"I didn't realize. I thought you had some experience."

"And now that you know I don't?"

"I'm not the one who's going to give it to you."

"But you wanted me!"

He glanced at her, then reached over to pull the shirt she wore down, covering her thighs.

"You're a very attractive woman," he admitted.

"But you don't love me. Is that it?"

"Love has nothing to do with what almost happened tonight."

Felicia felt a sharp pain in her chest, as though a doubled fist had hit her. "You really are a bastard, aren't you, Dane," she managed to say after a moment.

"Maybe I am, but I don't accept virginal offerings from young ladies eager to learn about life."

Felicia scrambled off the bed. "I hate you."

"I'm sure you do. At the moment, anyway. Tell me, was this some sort of bet you made, to see if you could seduce me tonight? For the record, you almost won. Another few minutes and I would have been unable to..."

"You don't need to lecture. You've made your point. I don't know why I ever thought I was in love with you. I must have been out of my mind to think I'd ever be happy married to an arrogant—"

"Married!" Dane almost flinched.

"Don't worry, Dane. I don't intend to blackmail you into marrying me, even though Adam might be curious about my being here with you tonight."

"I did not invite you here, Felicia. Tell Adam whatever suits you, so long as you keep your facts straight."

Felicia had never felt so humiliated in her life. All her dreams had

been shattered. Dane Rineholt didn't love her—never did and never would. The sooner she accepted that, the better.

THE SOUND of a phone ringing finally broke through Felicia's consciousness. Groping for the switch on the lamp beside her bed, she threw back the covers and stood up. By now, the ringing had stopped. She looked at her watch. It was almost three a.m.

She quietly opened her bedroom door and listened. Faintly she heard a voice downstairs. It sounded like Dane.

As quietly as possible, Felicia descended, pausing in the doorway of the office where Dane stood, clad only in jeans, listening on the phone. He had his back to her.

"She's insisting on going down there," she heard him say, and realized he was talking about her. "I can't tell her anything. You know that. It's too dangerous."

A sudden spurt of adrenaline shot through her body at his words. Adam was in danger and Dane knew why!

"Thanks for the report," he was saying. "Yeah, I wish the news had been better myself." A long pause ensued. "I'll just play it by ear. Hopefully you'll find him before she gets too involved. Then it's up to him to decide what to tell her." He nodded. "Talk to you later."

He turned to hang up and saw Felicia standing inside the doorway.

For the first time she was aware of her very skimpy nightshirt and the chill of the hardwood floor on her bare toes.

"You're going to catch cold coming downstairs like that," said Dane. "I turn the furnace down at night."

She glanced at his chest, then down to his bare feet. "I could say the same about you."

He smiled slightly, but the smile never reached the watchful intensity of his eyes.

"Who called?"

He shrugged. "Just a business associate."

"Did he have anything to do with Adam's disappearance?" she asked calmly.

He stared down at her in silence for a moment. "What's that supposed to mean?" he finally asked.

She crossed her arms, trying to hide the trembling that had overtaken her, partly because of nerves.

"I want to know what's going on."

He shook his head. "You know as much as I do, Felicia."

"And that's a lie," she responded swiftly. "I want to know what Adam was doing in Mexico, who he went to see and why."

He rubbed the tight muscles in his neck, studying her determined face. "I don't suppose we could postpone this discussion until morning, could we?" he asked. Her gaze never wavered, and soon he said, "I guess not. But I'm going up to put on a shirt and some shoes. I suggest you do the same. We might as well be comfortable."

By the time she'd returned, Dane had coffee made and a fire going in the den. He sat in one of the large overstuffed chairs in front of the fireplace, sipping from a large mug while gazing into the fire.

Felicia poured some of the brew into a cup and joined him in front of the fire.

"Do you think Adam is alive?" she asked.

Dane's gaze met hers. "I hope to God he is. If not, I'm responsible for his death."

There was so little expression in his voice that for a moment she missed the import of his words. When they registered, she almost flinched.

"Go on," she finally said.

"I've been working with a government covert operation for years—ever since I was in the service—on the drug problems that have plagued the United States. I became more active about five years ago when drugs seemed to be pouring across the river at an increased rate." He paused to sip his coffee. "Because of my increased absences from the ranch I had to tell Adam what I was doing. I don't suppose anyone can understand why a person would be willing to get involved in tracking down drug smugglers unless he's seen what addiction does to a person. My brother Johnny got involved with drugs and almost died."

"Our group is always understaffed, and when Adam offered to help I wasn't firm enough in my refusal to have him involved. That was four years ago."

"So you think his disappearance is drug related?"

"There's a strong possibility."

"Do you know who he was going to see?"

"No. He was following up some leads of his own. We tended to work independently of each other, so he had several contacts down there I

knew nothing about. The authorities had a couple of leads to follow, but that call tonight was to let me know they'd turned up nothing so far."

Felicia stared blindly into the fireplace. "I've got to know," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

"Believe me, I can understand your feelings. We'll be the first they notify when anything turns up."

She looked over at Dane. "I'm still going down there," she stated firmly.

The corner of his mouth tilted up slightly. "Now why doesn't that come as a surprise to me?" He stood.

She stood, too, facing him. "I don't care about the danger," she said. "All I care about is finding Adam."

"I know. And I'm going with you."

"I suppose we'd better get some sleep," she said. "It will be light soon."

He nodded. "We'll make plans later this morning."

*

LOOKING OUT the window, Dane studied the sky. The rain had stopped, but the wind was cold and blustery and he didn't look forward to the drive south—partly because he didn't know what they would find. He wished to hell Felicia would change her mind about the trip. She had no idea what they were dealing with and he saw no point in going into graphic detail about what these people did to those they felt had betrayed them.

He hoped she never had reason to find out.

Dane heard Felicia coming down the stairs, and went out to meet her. She wore woolen slacks and a bulky turtleneck that brought out the color of her eyes. Those eyes had haunted him for years.

He helped her with her jacket. Then, shrugging into his own, he picked up her bag.

Stepping outside, they were hit by a strong gust of wind and Felicia staggered under the impact. Dane pulled her into the shelter of his arms, using his body to block the wind. She was breathless by the time she settled into the seat next to him, but tried to convince herself the weather was to blame.

Their trip together was going to be every bit as uncomfortable as she had feared. She shivered.

"Are you cold?"

Felicia looked at him in surprise. "No, why?"

"I saw you shiver."

"Oh. No, I was thinking about Adam."

"I know this is hard on you, Felicia. Just try not to let your imagination run away with you."

"You're right, of course. But it's hard not to think about him. After all, that's why I'm here."

"Oh, I've never had any doubt about that," he said dryly. "You made it clear you were kicking the Texas dust from your feet five years ago when you left."

"I had something to prove—to myself and to you and Adam."

"Oh? What was that?"

"That I could make it on my own."

"Honey, there was never a doubt in our minds that whatever you went after, you'd get."

"Not everything," she murmured.

He smiled. "You were quite a handful back then. I'm surprised Adam and I don't have more gray hair than we do."

"You never seemed to have trouble dealing with me."

"You think not? I distinctly remember a few times that you got the best of me." He shook his head.

"There was one time in particular, but I doubt you'd even remember."

"Try me."

"That night I was foolish enough to take you back to my motel room in Austin."

"You would have to bring up the most embarrassing evening of my life," she muttered. *And the most heartbreaking*, she silently added.

"Embarrassing?" he repeated thoughtfully.

"Yes. You made your position quite clear. You didn't intend to waste your time on an inexperienced woman."

"You couldn't be more wrong," he responded. "I wanted to make love to you that night more than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

His quiet statement sent an electrical jolt through Felicia. "Then why didn't you?"

"Because one of us needed to hang on to his sanity. I figured that because I'm older, it had to be me."

"But you were willing enough at first, until you discovered I'd never been with a man before."

He remembered that moment as though it had just happened. He

could almost feel her body pressed against him, taste the warmth of her mouth.

"That brought me to my senses, thank God. I needed something to remind me that seducing you would end up making both of us miserable."

"How do you figure that?"

"You and I couldn't be more different if we tried, Felicia. We want different things from life. If I'd made love to you that night, we would have been married the next week. There would have been no job in L.A. No chance to spread your wings. You'd still be living at the ranch."

Remembering the devastation she'd felt that night, Felicia wanted to scream at him that he hadn't understood at all, that nothing would have made her happier than to have married him five years ago. Instead she said lightly, "Surely you don't expect me to believe you offer marriage to every woman you take to bed, Dane. If so, a lot of women must have turned you down over the years."

"I didn't say that. Besides, there haven't been all that many women." *Particularly after you came into my life*, he added silently. "You were different."

"I know. Inexperienced. Oh, well, that's all in the past now. Five years makes a difference." She was thinking about how her perspective had changed. What she had assumed to be Dane's rejection of her had been a reflection of his sense of caring and responsibility. From her new vantage point, she could better understand his concern.

Dane felt a sharp pain in the region of his heart at her words. *Five years makes a difference.* He wondered why her comment should hit him so hard. He had always been aware of Felicia's passionate nature. She threw herself into everything she did with utmost abandon. Lovemaking would be the same way. She had been eager for him to show her that aspect of life. He had known at the time that once he made love to her, he'd never be able to let her go. No doubt she had found other men who weren't quite so primitively possessive.

His decision not to make love to her had been proven right. Too bad he didn't feel better about it. He'd spent many a long, lonely night imagining what would have happened if he hadn't stopped when he did, how she would have responded, how it would have felt to possess her.

There had been a time a couple of years ago when he'd come close to flying out to see her, to confront her with his feelings. But he hadn't.

Now she was back and they were being thrown into a situation of intimacy that he wasn't sure he could handle. Just sharing the car with her, having her nearby so that he caught the scent of her perfume, so close that he could touch her, played havoc with all his good intentions.

They found a vacancy at a large motel in Laredo. Their rooms were located on the same floor, down the hall from each other.

Over dinner Felicia tried to draw Dane out. "The drive must have been tiring for you," she offered.

"Why do you say that?"

"You've been so quiet."

He took a swallow of the bourbon and water he'd ordered from the bar, then replied, "I was just now remembering you being so excited to see a motel room because you'd never been in one before."

She chuckled. "Yes, I was very green back then. You must have found me very boring."

"I found you adorable." His quiet statement caused a warm color to flow over her cheeks.

"Hardly that, I'm sure. I was pretty headstrong."

"Was?" he repeated.

She grinned. He seemed to be coming out of his mood. "I know I used to give you a bad time, Dane, but I didn't know how else to handle the way I felt about you."

He sat back in his chair slightly and studied her. "Was that what your rebellion was all about?"

She smiled. "Most of it."

"Well, the finished product was well worth it. You've turned into a pretty special person."

"Thank you, kind sir."

"I missed you," he said huskily. The tone of his voice and words tugged at her heartstrings.

"Is that why you called and wrote so much?"

"You know me better than that. I never wrote a letter in my life."

"You could have called."

"And said... what? I miss you, please come home?"

Taking courage, Felicia said softly, "If you had, Dane, I would have been home on the next flight."

Dane felt as though a sledgehammer had just hit him. He could only sit and stare at her in silence.

She took a sip of her wine, watching him. Dane looked stunned. Felicia felt a certain amount of satisfaction at having caught him so unaware. Following up on her advantage, she asked him, "Why have you stayed single all these years?" Would he even answer her?

"I think you know," he said after a moment. "You have kept me single."

She tried to think of something light to say.

Dane signaled the waiter to bring him another drink. "You've never had a clue about how I felt about you, have you?"

"I thought I did, when you refused to make love to me that night. I now realize you have some very strong protective instincts where I'm concerned."

"That's true. I loved you too much to take advantage of the situation. Too much to allow you to walk out of my life once I'd made love to you."

"And how do you feel about me now, Dane?" she asked, trying to hide the trembling deep inside her.

"My feelings have never changed."

So now she knew, Felicia thought in wonder. And here they were, once again in a motel together, both consenting adults. What were they going to do about it?

Probably nothing, thanks to Dane's code of honor. But was she ready for anything more? Loving him had become such a habit that she hadn't considered what it would mean to have her love returned.

A light seemed to come on within her at the thought. To have Dane

love her in return was a pleasure she needed to grow accustomed to. Knowing he loved her changed her perception of many things.

*

BY NINE O'CLOCK the next morning they were across the border and headed south. The drive to Monterey along winding mountainous roads was tedious and tiring, but the scenery was breathtaking.

When they arrived, Dane drove to the hotel where Adam had been staying.

The hotel clerk greeted Dane by name and he introduced Felicia as Adam's sister.

"Ah, yes, Señorita St. Clair. We were so sorry to hear about your brother's disappearance." He handed their keys to a young man. "Take their luggage on up, Jaime."

Jaime paused before two doors side by side. He opened each of them with a flourish and Felicia saw the connecting door, invitingly opened, into Dane's room as she walked into her own.

"We shouldn't be disturbed by any street noises here," Dane said, looking out at a patio that resembled a fairyland of tropical flowers and greenery.

"No."

He glanced around. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get some sleep."

She nodded. "That's a good idea for both of us, I think. Tomorrow is soon enough to make the rounds."

He looked so tired, and she loved him so much. She walked over to him and slid her arms around his

waist. She held him for a moment, needing to feel his warmth.

Slowly he placed his hands on her back, as though his reluctance were being overcome by a compulsive need to touch her. They stood there in silence for several minutes, absorbing each other. Then Felicia went up on tiptoes and kissed him softly. "Good night, Dane. I hope you sleep well." Slowly she pulled away.

His arms tightened around her. "Don't go." His voice sounded harsh.

She knew what he was feeling because she felt it, too. How could she walk away? All the years they had known each other had led to this moment.

She had to let him know that he was more important to her than anything else. She loved him. She was more than willing to show him that love in its most physical form.

With an almost soundless sigh, Felicia put her arms around his neck and kissed him. Dane needed no more encouragement than that.

Their urgency swept them onto the bed. Dane couldn't get enough of the taste of her, giving her long, mind-drugging kisses that reached inside her soul.

His iron self-control had deserted him, and as he tugged her clothes away from her, his mouth found new places to kiss, to touch, to taste.

Felicia felt as though she'd been caught up in a whirlwind of sensation. Everywhere he touched set off electrical charges that set her to quivering.

He paused, his hand brushing against her cheek. "Oh, Felicia. I

never meant it to be this way." His ragged breathing stirred her.

"It's okay, Dane. It's okay."

His mouth found hers once again, cutting off her words, and his hands began to memorize her body.

She felt his weight on her, pressing her into the bed, and she opened herself to him, holding him close as he made his entry.

A sharp pain shot through her, then was gone, to be replaced with a wonderful sense of completion, of wholeness—what she had yearned for all these years.

She brought her thighs tightly around him, locking him into a fierce grasp that urged him to take her with him into the world of sensual satisfaction.

His uncontrolled movement deep within her sparked flames that soon became infernos and Felicia cried out with the sudden riches unfolding before her. It was as if showers of color rained down around them, lighting the room.

And when Dane's arms tightened around her, a sudden spasm of deep contractions shook them both until they were limp.

Dane rolled onto his side, pulling her with him so that she remained firmly clasped in his arms, their legs still intimately entwined.

"I'm so sorry, love," he whispered. "So sorry."

"For what?" she murmured.

"For finally going over the edge...losing control... I didn't mean to."

"I'm glad you did." She reached up and smoothed the line between his brows.

"But it was your first time."

"Yes."

"You should never have been rushed and—"

"It's okay, Dane. Really."

His eyes drooped close. "I haven't slept since you came back," he murmured. "I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since that night I almost made love to you. And, now..." He was asleep.

Felicia lay there, wrapped closely in his arms, and thought about what had just happened.

Dane had finally made love to her. And it had been even more wonderful than she had imagined.

Her eyes shifted shut and she, too, fell asleep.

BRIGHT SUNLIGHT beamed through the windows of the room and Felicia blinked against the glare.

Glancing around, she realized she was in her bed, alone. The door that separated the rooms was closed.

Dane must have brought her in here. She had no recollection of coming to bed. Forcing herself up, she went in and showered, taking her time, trying to come to terms with the adjustments that would have to be made in their relationship.

Dressing carefully, she made sure she looked her best before knocking on the connecting door. She heard Dane's voice.

"It's open."

He sat on the side of his rumped bed, fully dressed, listening on the phone. "Okay, then give me what you have," he said.

Felicia watched as he took down whatever he was being told. Her eyes were drawn to the bed.

"All right. This will get us started," Dane said. "Felicia wants to put an ad in the paper, offering a reward for information." There was a pause, then he spoke again. "I know. But we've got to get some action. If this is all you've turned up in a week, we're in trouble."

When he hung up he stood and looked at her with an intent gaze. "How are you feeling?"

She smiled. "I'm fine."

"We need to talk about last night, but not now. There's too much to do. But I do want you to know that you don't have to worry about anything. I'll take care of what needs to be done."

What was he talking about? Before she could ask, he said, "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"Yes."

At the table, Dane pulled out the notes he'd made.

"I've been given the name of a man who is one of the best agents in the Mexican operations. He's difficult to trace, but if anyone can help us, it's Alvarez."

"So what do you suggest?"

He looked at her for several long moments. "Felicia," he said finally, "the people I need to contact will not meet me with you along. I must go by myself. I'd feel much better if you'd wait here until I get back."

"How long do you think it will take?"

"I can't predict, but I'll try to get back by midafternoon."

"Isn't there anything I can do? I could at least go to the paper, talk to the police."

He thought for a moment, then nodded. "All right. See what you

can find out. But be back here no later than noon, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

He sat studying her. Then with something like resignation he said, "I know you aren't going to like this, but I want us to get married as soon as I can make the arrangements down here."

Surely there had been more romantic proposals.

Felicia merely murmured, "Do you?"

He seemed to relax at her calm response. Taking her hand, he said, "It's the best way I know to protect you at the moment. You said you love me, and I believe that. You know how I feel about you. Under normal circumstances we wouldn't be in such a hurry, but after last night, I don't want to take a chance that you might be pregnant. If anything should happen to me, you'd have the protection of my name."

She studied him gravely. "Are you afraid something is going to happen to you?"

"I'm certainly not counting on it. But we're into something dangerous now. Once we find Adam and get out of here we can have the marriage annulled if you aren't pregnant. You'll be free to go back to L.A. and continue your life there."

"And what will you do?"

"That part doesn't matter. The main thing is, you'll be okay, no matter what happens."

Dane's intent gaze seemed to swallow her. He had always protected her. Why was she surprised at his attitude now? But she didn't need his protection. She wanted his love.

He's giving you that, too, she reminded herself.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

He smiled. "Let's go find out how to get married."

Dane knew his way around the city. Within an hour he had obtained the necessary papers and a local official who promptly married them. Then he whisked her back to the hotel, saying, "I'll see you this afternoon."

Well. The new bride has been escorted to her suite and abandoned. Felicia looked around and realized that they no longer needed two rooms. After informing the front desk, she moved her things in with Dane, made sure the connecting door was locked and headed out.

First, the newspaper office, where she found someone to help her draw up a notice. Then she went to the police station.

After waiting almost half an hour, she was shown into the office of Lieutenant Delgado.

"How may I help you, Señora Rineholt?"

She loved the sound of that name.

"My brother, Adam St. Clair, was staying here in Monterrey last week and he is now missing."

"St. Clair. Yes, I remember. Excuse me." He spoke into the phone in rapid Spanish. Soon after he hung up, a young woman walked in, handed him a file, then left. He studied it in silence. When he looked up, his expression was grave. "Do you know why your brother was here in Mexico?"

"I was told he was here on business."

He glanced down. "Ah, yes. Business. I'm afraid it's a very dangerous business your brother is doing."

"Yes, I know. I found out after he'd disappeared."

"Another agency in our government has taken over the investigation. They will keep us informed, but—" he shrugged "—I don't think I am going to be able to assist you, señora."

Felicia stood up and held out her hand. "I appreciate your courtesy in seeing me, Lieutenant. If any news does turn up, please contact us at our hotel."

"Certainly." His voice was grave and she shivered. He didn't expect to have any news. Not any *good* news.

Felicia hurried back to the hotel. She was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't see the man until he stepped up beside her.

"Señorita St. Clair?"

Startled, she glanced up. "Yes?" She stared into the man's dark eyes. Without another word he grasped her arm and shoved her into the back seat of a limousine parked at the curb.

The wide seat easily held its three passengers. With as much dignity as possible, Felicia sat between the other two occupants.

She could not remember ever having been so frightened. "Who are you?" she asked, wishing her voice didn't sound so shaky.

"*No es importante*," was the answer.

It might not be important to you, she thought, but I'd like to know what's going on.

"Where are you taking me?"

Her question was greeted with silence.

She looked out the window, trying to get her bearings. The car was moving away from the central part of the city into the residential area. Was it possible she was being taken to Adam? At least she would know he was all right.

The limousine turned into a driveway and waited while a wrought-iron gate opened slowly. Then it followed a winding driveway through trees and around hills, stopping before a house that was so large it seemed to sprawl over several acres.

Her escorts ushered her from the car to a room that was large enough for a football scrimmage, nodded and left, closing the double doors behind them.

"Come in, Señorita St. Clair."

A slight, elderly man rose from a chair behind a majestic desk and strode across the Persian rug.

"Please, won't you sit down?" He motioned to a comfortable chair. "Would you like some coffee, perhaps, or tea?" His face was a deep teak color; his hair, an iron gray. He looked very distinguished.

"Who are you?" she finally managed to say.

"I am Felipe Santiago. I thought, of course, that you would know that, or you would never have accepted my invitation to visit."

"I didn't receive an invitation, Mr. Santiago. Your men forced me into a car and brought me here."

He frowned. "There must be some mistake. Please forgive me. I asked them to deliver a message to your

hotel that I would like to speak with you regarding your brother."

"Do you know where Adam is?" she asked eagerly.

"Unfortunately I do not. However, I do know your brother quite well."

"Did you see him on this trip?"

"Yes. We had dinner the first evening he was here."

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"Not really, but I would not worry about him if I were you, Señorita. I believe he can take care of himself."

"I know. But I've been so worried."

"That is understandable. How long do you intend to stay here in Monterrey, Señorita St. Clair?"

"Actually, my name is Rineholt, Mr. Santiago. My husband and I may stay until we can find Adam."

"Dane Rineholt is your husband?"

She smiled. "Yes. Do you know Dane?"

"No. However, Adam often speaks of him. They are partners, I believe. But he has never mentioned that the two of you are married."

"There was no reason to, I'm sure."

"No," Felipe agreed thoughtfully, "I don't suppose there was." He was silent for several minutes, then, as though coming to a decision, he stood. "Well, I could not have Adam's sister and partner remaining at a hotel. Both of you must stay here while you are in Monterrey."

Felicia also stood. "Oh, no. We can't do that. As a matter of fact, I'm sure Dane is quite worried by

now. I was supposed to have met him several hours ago."

"Nonsense. I insist. I will call your husband and have him meet us here for dinner."

"But—"

"Please do not feel you are imposing. I have more than enough room. Come. I will show you."

Felicia slowly followed him, to find him waiting by the ornate stairway to the second floor. Lightly grasping her elbow, he escorted her up the stairs.

She couldn't decide what to do. He was being polite, yet she felt he was no friend of Adam's, no matter what he had to say.

At the end of the hall, Felipe opened a door and motioned her into an enormous room with windows on two sides. An oversize bed occupied only a small portion of the room, part of which was a sitting room. "It's beautiful," she said.

Felipe nodded graciously. "Thank you. I believe you will be most comfortable here, señora. I'm sure you must be tired. If you would like to rest, feel free."

Did she have a choice? She walked a few steps inside and heard the door close behind her with a distinct click.

Her kind host had just locked her inside the room.

DANE HAD gotten a great deal of information in a few hours. There was no doubt that Adam had been involved in a big drug buy. Playing himself, he had convinced the necessary parties that his position as a rancher was a perfect cover for dealing in large quantities of drugs.

Adam's disappearance could have been caused by several different factions.

Dane would need to follow up some of the leads before he was sure the group he was currently working with hadn't been the ones responsible. He didn't know what he was going to tell Felicia. The news was not good. Since no one had seen or heard from Adam since the day he'd disappeared, chances were good that he had been killed the same day.

Dane opened the door to his room, not too surprised to find it empty. But the other room was empty too, and none of Felicia's things were there.

What the hell?

He called the front desk.

"This is Dane Rineholt. Where is Miss St. Clair?"

"I do not know, sir."

"None of her things are in her room."

"No, sir. She said she would no longer need it."

"I see," he said, and hung up. He should have known. She had been too docile this morning, agreeing to the marriage, then that he should check on his leads alone.

But where could she be? He went into the bathroom for a drink. Reaching for a glass, he froze. Her toiletries were neatly set out next to his.

He walked back into the bedroom. Her suitcase was behind his. Dane took a deep breath and relaxed. Of course. She had moved into his room. He'd been scared she had left him.

He laughed, the sound loud in the quiet of the room. But where the hell was she?

He paced the floor, wondering whether to go look for her or stay at the hotel.

The sudden ringing of the phone startled him. He grabbed it before it could ring again.

"Rineholt."

"Are you interested in seeing your pretty wife again, señor?" a voice said softly.

Dane's worst fears had just been put into words. He felt as though a giant hand had squeezed his heart. "Yes," he said.

"Then you will follow my instructions."

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THE DIRECTIONS were detailed and obviously set up to be sure that he was not being followed. When Dane got to the designated area, he pulled up and parked, then switched off his headlights. Checking the time, he realized he was early. Did they intend to bring her to him?

A car approached slowly. When it was even with his car, it stopped and the window was rolled down.

"Dane Rineholt?"

"Yes."

The back door opened. "Get in."

He didn't need a second invitation.

The car seemed to get lost in a maze of streets, finally turning into a curving driveway. He noted that wrought-iron gates closed behind them as soon as they passed.

Dane was escorted inside a white adobe villa and left in a wide hall-

way with a curving staircase. Was Felicia here?

A young man in dark pants and a white coat appeared, carrying a large tray of food.

"Señor Rineholt?"

"Yes."

"Follow me, please."

Dane followed him up the staircase. "Whose home is this?"

"Señor Santiago's, señor."

Dane had never heard the name.

The man paused at the end of the hallway, shifted the tray to his shoulder and unlocked the door. "Your room, señor," he said.

Felicia stood by a far window, looking out.

"Felicia!"

"Oh, Dane!" She threw herself into his arms, and he held her as though he never intended to let her go. Neither of them heard the door close behind the young man.

Cupping her face in his hands, Dane let his eyes wander over it. Then his mouth found hers in a searing kiss that left them both shaken.

"Dear God!" Dane managed to mutter in a husky voice. "I've never been so scared in my life. Are you all right?" he asked with concern, brushing a wisp of hair off her forehead.

She nodded. "Now that you're here."

He glanced around the room, then back at her. "How did you get here, anyway?"

"I was on my way back to the hotel when a man called my name, then pushed me into a car. When I arrived, Felipe Santiago introduced himself as a friend of Adam's. Then

he started asking me about his disappearance."

"Did he say why he kept you here?"

"No. But when I told him we were married, he insisted we stay here with him."

"Did you tell him how long we'd been married?"

"No. Something gave me the feeling that our being married didn't fit in with his plans."

"I hope that works in our favor," Dane said, bringing her fingers to his lips, where he slowly kissed the tip of each one. "So far the marriage hasn't been much of a protection for you."

"It has if that's the reason you're here," she responded. "How did you know where to find me?"

"I didn't. I got a phone call."

"Did you find out anything about Adam?" Felicia asked.

"Nothing encouraging, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that as soon as we can get away from here, we need to get back across the border fast."

"Dane! Does that mean..."

"There's no way to know, Felicia. But our being in Mexico isn't helping anything. We've stumbled into a real mess and I want you out of here."

He walked over to the window. "What were you watching earlier?"

"The dogs. I saw three of them. Dobermans."

"I had a hunch they wouldn't be Chihuahuas. So even if we get out of this room, we still have to get off the property in one piece."

Felicia joined him at the window. "I don't think Santiago intends to hurt us, Dane. He seems to be trying to find out how much we know about Adam being down here."

Dane pulled her next to him and she rested against his long length. "Other than the locked door, he's treated me with courtesy. He invited me downstairs for dinner, but I told him I wasn't feeling well, so he had dinner sent up."

Dane glanced over at the table. "Shall we eat?"

Felicia's gaze followed his. "I'm not all that hungry, are you?"

He shook his head. "But I could use a shower. Is there one available?"

Felicia smiled. "Oh, yes. We have all the conveniences of home." She walked over and opened a door, revealing a luxurious bathroom with a large shower stall and tub.

Dane needed no more encouragement. He disappeared into the other room and turned on the water.

Felicia walked over and looked at the tray of food. Then she glanced over her shoulder toward the bathroom.

Succumbing to impulse, she stepped out of her clothes and wrapped a towel around herself like a sarong. Then she walked into the bathroom and opened the shower door.

Dane glanced around, startled, then grinned as she dropped the towel and closed the door behind her.

"I got lonesome," she explained solemnly as she began to soap his back.

"I understand the feeling." He smiled. Turning around, he took the soap from her and began to lather her body lovingly, from neck to thighs, with a gentle touch that soon had her trembling.

The warm water smoothed the lather away, leaving them both glistening with moisture. Dane's gaze seemed to burn her skin wherever it touched. Without taking his eyes off her or saying a word, he reached over and turned off the water.

Opening the shower door, Dane stepped out, picked up her towel and began to dry her. She stood there before him, already aroused by his touch, and watched him as he dried himself. Then he carried her into the other room.

When Dane reached the bed he stood her on her feet and smiled. "This time I intend to do this right." He pulled the covers down to the foot of the bed. Then he picked her up and placed her in the center.

"This is our wedding night, you know," Felicia murmured.

"I'm very much aware of that fact," he replied. He propped himself up on one elbow beside her, studying her expression, and she smiled—a slow, tantalizing smile that increased the beat of his already racing heart. Dane placed his hand on her cheek and stroked it lightly with his finger, then began to trace a trail along her body, circling her breasts, then her navel, moving down to the short curls below her abdomen.

She reached out and caressed his chest, then slowly let her fingers slide down until they touched his aroused masculinity. Felicia heard him catch his breath and smiled.

As though he could no longer tolerate what she was making him feel, he held her against him as he rolled over onto his back, so that her body blanketed him. "Oh, Felicia. I'll never get enough of you—your touch, your presence or your love in my life," he murmured, hungrily searching for her mouth.

Their slow, relaxed lovemaking escalated into a fiery need. Dane's hands wrapped around her waist in a firm grip and he lifted her slightly, fitting her to him, before surging upward, deep inside her.

Felicia almost cried out with the wonder of his aggressive possession. He felt so good to her, strong and hard, and she luxuriated in the feeling that they belonged together. They had waited so many years for this magic, but it had been worth the wait.

She could hold her own with this man now. They were equals. At the moment she enjoyed the sense of being in control, even if for a few moments, as she set a pace for them in the ancient ritual of lovemaking.

Dane could take only so much before he pulled her down to his chest and hung on to her while he rolled over, placing her beneath him. She smiled up at him, noticing the tiny furrow between his brow, the slight dampness of his face, his look of concentration that caused her to lose what little control she'd salvaged.

She clamped her thighs tighter around his hips, meeting each of his movements with one of her own. Then she was lost to everything but sensation. She felt as though she were in the midst of a celestial colli-

sion, with thousands of stars spinning out of control.

Dane's final lunge seemed to carry them away from earth's gravity, causing them to drift in utter contentment before falling into an exhausted sleep.

Yet during the night Dane reached for her again and again, to touch her hand and feel the ring on her finger, to stroke her breast, to kiss her slightly swollen lips and to ignite the flame within her once again.

WHEN DANE woke up the next morning, he glanced around the large, airy room, then saw Felicia sound asleep a few inches away.

God, how he loved her! And he was going to do everything he could to protect her. Moving carefully so as not to wake her, he crawled out of bed. After a quick shower he put on the clothes he'd worn the day before.

He decided to try the door, and discovered that it wasn't locked, so he went in search of his host. From the dining-room doorway, he watched as a gray-haired man stood up at the table and said, "Good morning, Señor Rineholt. I trust you slept well. Won't you join me for breakfast?"

Was this affable man the same one who had abducted Felicia and spirited him to his home?

Felipe poured another cup of coffee and set it at the place to his left. "My name is Felipe Santiago. I happen to be an old friend of Adam St. Clair's."

"So Felicia said. He's never mentioned your name."

"Is that so? I'm surprised. He often speaks of you."

Dane took a sip of the coffee. It was excellent. "Look, would you mind telling me what's going on?"

Felipe's face sobered. "Señor Rineholt. You and your wife have no business down here at the moment. In my own way I have tried to protect you. You are asking questions in places where the answers are fatal. Rather than try to reason with you, I chose to bring you here."

"Do you know where Adam is?"

"No. But I have reason to believe that he is dead."

Hearing the words spoken with such certainty was like a blow. "Did you kill him?" Dane managed to ask.

"Of course not. We were doing business together. Working with Adam, I stood to make a great deal of money. I am afraid someone caught a scent of that money."

Dane realized that Santiago didn't know Adam was an agent, which meant that he must be a dealer. How ironic that they should get protection from him.

"What makes you believe Adam is dead?" Dane asked.

"Otherwise he would have contacted me. I feel certain that he was double-crossed by someone he trusted—someone, perhaps, we both trusted."

"Where does that leave you?"

"Without a means to sell what I am holding, but I have other avenues to pursue, as you well know."

"What do you mean?"

"I know who you are, Señor Rineholt. Your name keeps coming up whenever I am looking for an-

other distribution source. I thought perhaps we could talk business while you are visiting with me."

"I wouldn't mind if my wife weren't here. She knows nothing about all this, and I want to keep her out of it."

"I don't understand why you brought her."

"She wanted to find her brother."

"She won't find him."

"I believe you. So I intend to take her home."

"You're a very intelligent man, Señor Rineholt."

Dane held the other man's gaze. "If you'll help me get back to the hotel, we'll be headed for the border by noon."

Felipe nodded. "If you will give me your car keys, I will have the car delivered to the hotel. And my car will be available at your convenience."

Dane stood up. "Thank you. I appreciate your concern for our safety. Other than that initial scare, we've had a very pleasant stay with you."

WHEN THEY walked across the lobby the clerk motioned to them. Dane guided Felicia over to the desk.

"Your car keys were delivered a few moments ago, Señor Rineholt. Your car has been serviced for you."

"Thank you." He dropped the keys into his pants pocket.

When he unlocked the door of their room, he pushed it open and allowed Felicia to pass him, then stepped in and closed it. Their suitcases were where they had left them. Dane figured that as soon as they

packed their toiletries they would be on their way.

He heard Felicia gasp, and spun around. In the far corner of the room sat a dark-haired man.

"I understand you have been looking for me," the stranger said. "My name is Alvarez."

The drapes had been closed and he sat in shadows.

"How long have you been here?" Dane asked.

"It doesn't matter." He looked at Felicia. "You are Adam St. Clair's sister?"

"Yes. Do you know where he is?" she asked.

Alvarez slowly shook his head. "He was scheduled to meet a man who was hiding in the mountains, and who had the proof we needed to nail the person who controls the drug route in this area."

"Felipe Santiago," Dane said.

Alvarez straightened in his chair. "You know him?"

"We've just spent the night as his guests."

"How did you meet him?"

"He found us," Dane replied. "But what about this man Adam was supposed to meet?"

"We can't find him. But we did find Adam's car."

Felicia jumped up. "Where?"

"In the mountains. It had been pushed over the side, but there was enough left to identify it."

"Was there any sign of Adam?" Dane asked.

"No."

The three sat in silence for several minutes. Finally Alvarez spoke. "What do you intend to do now?"

"I'm taking Felicia back home."

"That's a good idea. At present we are still searching for the man Adam hoped to contact. If we can find him, we may still be able to accomplish what Adam set out to do."

The two men looked at each other, silently communicating. Dane held out his hand. "Thank you for coming. I know how dangerous this has been for you."

"I'm sorry there isn't more." Alvarez stepped behind the drapes and they heard the window being raised. "Good luck," he said in a low voice.

"You, too," Dane responded.

"Is this yours?" Felicia asked, as Dane turned around. She held an envelope. "It was lying here by the phone."

"Maybe one of the maids put it there."

Felicia opened it, and when a slip of paper and a photo fell out, she leaned over to pick them up.

Her sudden cry seemed to pierce him. He strode to her side just as her legs gave way. She had fainted.

Carefully placing her on the bed, Dane picked up the contents of the envelope.

The note contained two words: "Go home." The photo told its own story. A body lay in a crumpled heap on a mountain road near a car. He recognized the car. He also recognized the body.

It was Adam.

*

WARM APRIL sunshine flooded the Texas countryside. Spring showers had turned the grass and trees a vibrant green. Everywhere she looked Felicia saw signs of growth and rebirth.

She felt as though she had been through a long, serious illness and was only now beginning to heal. Her grief for Adam had been an illness of sorts and she wondered if it would ever completely go away.

Sitting down in the porch swing, she gave a slight push that started it swaying gently. Felicia had learned a great deal about life in the past two months.

She barely remembered the long trip home from Monterrey. Felicia had cried until there had been no tears left. By the time of the memorial service she had escaped to the numbness that had protected her from more pain than she could handle.

The official word was that Adam had been killed in an automobile accident. No one needed to know why he had been willing to risk his life.

Thanks to men like Alvarez and Lieutenant Delgado, Adam hadn't died in vain. Working together, they had pieced together his last few days. Santiago had been correct—Adam had been double-crossed. The authorities found the man he had gone to meet, and enough evidence to have Felipe Santiago arrested without ever revealing Adam's part in the investigation.

Adam would have been pleased.

DANE SAT on a stone outcrop that overlooked the river and the ranch, staring out at the surrounding hills. He'd gotten into the habit of coming up here, trying to come to terms with all that had happened.

Adam was gone. He could no longer hide from that fact. Dane had thought he was prepared for the

possibility, but seeing the photograph had shown him differently—particularly when he knew that if he himself hadn't been involved, Adam would not have been.

Dane also blamed himself for pushing Felicia into a hasty marriage. He hadn't been fair to either one of them. With Adam gone, Dane had to stay on the ranch, but he had promised Felicia that they would work out something regarding her career and his. The only solution he could come up with was to let her return to California without him, and he wasn't sure how he'd be able to deal with the separation. Dane glanced at his watch. It was almost noon.

DANE'S TRUCK bounced up the driveway and came to a stop in front of the house. Felicia's heart began to beat faster at the sight of him.

Dane stood in the kitchen doorway and watched Felicia as she brought a large pitcher of tea from the refrigerator. "Are you ready to eat?" she asked.

Dane nodded and went down the hallway to the bathroom.

When he returned to the kitchen he picked up a serving dish and began to fill his plate.

They ate in silence, each rehearsing what they wanted to say to the other. Felicia cleared their places and served peach cobbler and coffee before sitting down again.

"Felicia? I, uh, was just going to ask if you'd talked to your boss lately."

Here it comes, Felicia thought sadly. "No, I haven't, but I need to."

"I suppose you've extended your leave about as long as you can, haven't you?"

"I suppose so," she murmured.

"So what are your plans?"

She stared at him helplessly.

"What do you want me to do, Dane?"

Dane threw down his napkin. "Damn it, Felicia, you're not being fair. I want you to be happy. I know your job's important to you—"

"Not as important as you are, Dane. I can always find another job. A husband is a different matter."

"Are you saying you want to stay here—with me?"

"If you want me."

He got up so quickly his chair fell over. He was beside her in two strides. "Of course I want you. I've always wanted you." He lifted her in his arms and started up the stairs.

"You didn't finish your dessert," Felicia managed.

"The peach cobbler can wait. I've got other plans for dessert."

Dane carried her into his room and lowered her onto the bed, then stood there watching her while he unfastened his shirt. He wasted no time in ridding himself of the rest of his clothing and joining her on the bed. With practiced ease he began to remove her clothing.

"Dane, I think we need to talk."

"Talk," he replied, and removed her remaining garments.

"Are you sure you want to... I mean... are we even legally married?"

He stopped abruptly and looked down at her. "Would you rather not be married to me?"

She brushed her hand against his chest. "I want very much to be married to you."

"That's good to know," he growled softly, "because the marriage was quite legal." He lowered his head until his lips touched hers. His kiss was warm and possessive, as his tongue traced first her top lip, then her bottom lip, before plunging into her mouth. She shifted restlessly and he caught her thigh between his, clamping it firmly so that she could feel him pushing against her.

He began to kiss her from her nose to her knees—soft kisses, nipping kisses—touching her with an expertise that drove her wild. Then he started a path of kisses that began on the inside of her knee and continued up her inner thigh.

"Oh, Dane, please don't do this to me..."

His touch was like setting off a charge of dynamite inside her and just when she thought she could no longer stand it, Dane lifted himself higher and buried himself deep inside her.

Her arms and legs wrapped around him, holding him to her in a convulsive grip as Dane set the pace, never losing control.

The fire deep inside her raged, then exploded with a cascade of sparks that caused her body to release all its tension. Then the white hot flames turned into soothing tongues of tranquility.

Dane felt her body explode and he could no longer control his reaction. He quivered with the force of his excitement as he felt first the heat of

the fire, then the soothing coolness of the aftermath of their passion.

They lay there in a tangle of sheets, their overheated bodies damp with perspiration.

After a few minutes Dane said quietly, "Are you sure you want to give up your job?"

Felicia turned her head on the pillow. "I'm sure."

"Won't you be bored staying at home?"

"I don't think so. I intend to try writing a book, and besides, I'm going to have quite enough to keep me occupied, since we didn't waste any time getting started on our family...."

"What?" Dane jackknifed into a sitting position. "Do you mean...?"

She nodded. "I mean just what you think. I had my suspicions, so I had some tests run. They called with the results this morning."

He grinned. "I'm delighted about our baby." He gave her a long and very possessive kiss.

"I love you," she told him when he straightened slightly.

"I love you, too."

The ringing of the phone was an unwelcome intrusion. She stirred, reluctant to move away from him. He said, "Let it ring. Whoever it is will call back."

"I can't do that. It drives me crazy not to know who's calling." She reached for the phone.

"Felicia? Is that you? What are you doing at the ranch?"

Felicia felt as though she were going to faint. The voice on the phone couldn't be—

"Adam! Is this Adam?"

She heard his laugh, Adam's special laugh that no one could possibly duplicate. "You bet it's Adam. Where is Dane? I need to talk to him."

"Dane's right here. Where are you?"

"I'm in Del Rio, trying to get home. I'm a little short on transportation, and having trouble proving my identity. I don't have any papers on me."

"Oh, God, Adam, you're alive," Felicia said, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"Adam! Is it really you?" Dane said, taking the phone.

"You'd better believe it's me, although everyone around here keeps telling me I'm dead."

"Don't let a little thing like that upset you now. Where the hell are you?"

"Del Rio. I got as far as the border and was taken into custody, which is a laugh, isn't it? How about coming down here and bailing me out?"

"There's nothing I'd rather do, partner. We'll be there as soon as we can get there."

"What's Felicia doing in Texas?"

"That's another story. We'll have time to fill each other in once we get you home."

A WEEK went by before Adam felt like doing much more than eating and sleeping. His body demanded recuperation time. Dane kept busy on the ranch and Felicia tried to keep herself occupied, but it was hard. She would find herself tiptoeing upstairs to make sure Adam was all right.

He caught her doing that one day. "I feel like a fool, lying in bed and letting Dane do all the work around here."

"Don't worry about it. As soon as you're on your feet, Dane and I will take off on that honeymoon we never had and let you run things for a while, okay?"

"Sounds good to me. God, it's good to have you back home, sis."

"That's exactly what I was thinking about you."

"Do you miss your job in L.A.?"

"Not like I thought I would. Besides, I'm with Dane."

"I always thought you put up quite a front where your feelings for Dane were concerned."

"I would probably never have given in to them if you hadn't gone missing. I flew home to find you." She grinned at him for a moment. "What happened, Adam?"

"It's a long story. One of these days I'll sit down and tell the details to both of you. But the important thing is that I made it to hell and back."

"At least you don't have any reason to return."

He lay there looking at her in silence for a while. "A baby, huh?"

"Yep."

"That's just like you. Jump in and start a family first thing. You always were headstrong."

"Dane is rapidly taming me, believe me."

"Good for Dane." He grew thoughtful. "You never know why things happen the way they do. I believe you and Dane have discovered what I learned during the past two months. Loving someone and sharing your life with a person can add a powerful dimension to your existence."

"You talk as though you've discovered what love can do."

"I have. I've always known how I felt about the two of you, but I need to tell you that I'm going back to Mexico when I'm fully recovered. There's someone there who not only saved my life, but my soul and my sanity. I told her I was coming back for her—and I'm going."

"She sounds pretty special."

Dane suddenly appeared at the doorway. "Just as I suspected. Here you are entertaining my wife in your bedroom again. We'll have to have a talk."

Felicia walked over to him and going up on tiptoe, she kissed him, her heart overflowing with love.

"I don't think you'll ever have to worry, cowboy. I've got my hands full trying to take care of you."

Dane hugged her to him, then looked over at Adam, who exchanged a glance of silent communication.

The St. Clair ranch was back in full operation—everyone was home.



STAR SIGNS—JANUARY & FEBRUARY



LIBRA September 23–October 22

Arguments and disagreements seem to fill your time early in the month, so be prepared to listen to someone else's side of the story. Professional success is high on your list of ambitions and now is a good time to test yourself. You'll be surprised at what you can accomplish.



SCORPIO October 23–November 22

Family rally around at the start of the month when you need cheering up. Just relax and let yourself go, and join in the fun. Your social life is definitely looking up; what you've been planning comes through. A small nagging worry gets resolved.



SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22

New opportunities on the horizon fill you with optimism for the month ahead. Fix a mistake you made in the past. Romance is humming along just fine, but take time to listen to your partner.



CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

Changes in your career have come at a good time; things will probably go well. Midmonth finds you busy socializing, and a surprise is in store around the 24th.



AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

You feel a strong need to get away on your own at the start of the month; travel seems to be a high priority. Loved ones may feel neglected, so make sure you give them lots of attention.



PISCES February 23–March 22

You've got a longtime ambition on your mind, but be ready to take advice or you may find yourself involved in something difficult to get out of. Sort out those financial matters now.

STAR SIGNS (continued)

**ARIES March 23–April 22**

You might feel pressured this month; ask for help from those close to you. Your temper gets you in trouble so keep it under control.

**TAURUS April 23–May 22**

A new hobby takes up a lot of your time, so you'll be busy later in the month trying to catch up on jobs that should have been done earlier. The temptation to overspend should be curbed when possible.

**GEMINI May 23–June 21**

A relationship is going very well now, so don't make the mistake of taking a loved one for granted. Show them you care! A new face could appear on the scene around the 10th and you feel a need to make him or her welcome.

**CANCER June 22–July 22**

Taking up a new sport or hobby last month has revitalized you, so now is a good time to sort out any problems on the home front. A financial opportunity requires some grappling with, but it's worth the effort.

**LEO July 23–August 22**

Money matters should be sorted out at the start of this month. An anxious time around the 16th will pass and you can look forward to an exciting end to the month.

**VIRGO August 23–September 22**

An enthusiastic start to the month continues until the 10th when you enter an indecisive period and find it hard to knuckle down to anything. Be patient and things will go according to plan. You may be faced with an ultimatum at the end of the month, but face it with confidence.

COMING IN FUTURE ISSUES OF

HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Romances

ROOM FULL OF ROSES • Diana Palmer

Only one thing stood in the way of Wynn Ascot's marriage—her legal guardian, McCabe Foxe. A hard-headed journalist, Wynn was uncharacteristically devastated by the new, disturbing feelings McCabe aroused. But he was a man who made no commitments and asked for none. With Wynn, it was all or nothing, and though her heart had already been captured, the surrender would have to be on her terms.

CORPORATE AFFAIR • Stephanie James

Beautiful tycoon Kalinda Brady hadn't expected the sparks to fly with Rand Alastair, artist and fisherman, the stranger whose caresses left her yearning for more. Kalinda had come to Colorado determined to avenge a lost love. But Rand's powerful embrace left her torn between her passion for revenge and hunger for this lover who conquered her heart, stole into her world and proceeded to make it his own.

Look for these stories
and many more in
future issues!

READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #16

ACROSS

1. Curve
4. Gels
8. Verdi heroine
12. Expensive
14. Concur
15. Nursery item
16. Wise man
17. Position
18. Give in
19. Country paths
21. Nebraska, e.g.
23. Wear away
25. Trials
28. Watch out!
30. Eases up
32. Sea bird
33. Arum-family plant
35. Brownish
36. Small masses
38. Incline
40. Back-to-school mo.
41. Mme. Peron
43. Fencing sword
44. Shoe width
45. More harsh
47. Intermission
50. Drive back
51. Financier John Jacob ____
52. Greets
54. Plumed bird

DOWN

57. Man
60. Benefactor
62. Spoken
64. Ajar
65. Levels
66. Anger
67. Unites
68. Dry
69. Mesh
1. Sullivan et al.
2. Close tightly
3. Epic
4. NCO
5. Obliterate
6. Camper's lodging
7. Calm
8. Entrances
9. Anger
10. Performed
11. Mr. Vigoda
13. Begin again
14. Classifies
20. Epoch
22. Hardy heroine
24. Storekeeper
26. Wigwags
27. Long-billed birds
28. More daring
29. Salad green
30. Isolated ones
31. Fill
32. Sheep
34. Strike sharply

37. Author King et al.
39. Wobbles
42. Space
46. Skips over
48. Geared wheel
49. Mistake
51. Actor Ed ____
53. Strong emotion
55. ____ go brag!
56. Story
57. Cut grass
58. Mimic
59. Conducted
61. Individual
63. Permit

Solution on page 105 of this issue.



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HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST

Romances

DIXIE BROWNING—A Secret Valentine

He was the last man on earth she could trust. Love was a cruel teacher for Grace Spencer, and she was determined that no man would ever take advantage of her again. She certainly didn't need Quinn Donovan, with his insolent smile and devastating reputation with women. He was too big, too uncouth, too... too attractive.

EMILIE RICHARDS—Gilding the Lily

Lesley Belmont had always held back—from success, from men, from love. Now she was determined that for her first solo interview—with Travis Hagen, America's premier cartoonist—she was going to give it her all! How could an interview go so wrong? One look, one kiss, and Lesley knew she was a goner. This was no laughing matter....

EVE GLADSTONE—A Taste of Deception

Kate Manning's life was relatively calm until an important piece of defense equipment somehow ended up in a box of her homemade chocolates! Inventor Tony Kendall was determined to keep her by his side until the missing box was found. And though Kate knew she shouldn't trust him, she also couldn't resist his charm as together they embarked on a frantic search to find more than they had bargained for....

ANNETTE BROADRICK—Return to Yesterday

Felicia St. Clair wasn't going to let it happen again. She had come home to search for her brother, Adam, not to fall for Dane Rineholt. She'd already made that mistake once! Searching for Adam would be dangerous, but traveling with Dane was an even greater risk. Soon Felicia was in deeper than she'd ever meant to be... and loving every minute.